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ISSUE 14

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INSIDE
FALLOUT 3
SACRED 2 * FUEL
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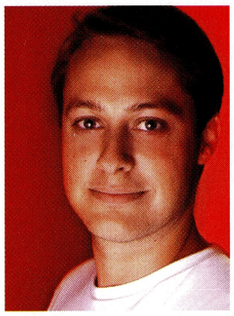

They say it's the little things in life that count. The big things don't come along all that often, and when they do, they're not always necessarily what they're cracked up to be. What's true in our meagre little existences here on the third rock is also apparently true in the third place – gaming. Those five-year dev cycle, big-budget releases can all too often leave a sour taste in our mouths. The problem being that they rarely live up to their own hype. Interest peaks before the game even lands, and the promises laid down during their lengthy development rarely come to fruition leaving a mass of unhappy punters in their wake.

Thankfully, it's the wealth of smaller titles that keep the good ship PC gaming afloat, and 2008 has been as buoyant a year as anyone could have hoped for. Take *World Of Goo* for example (page 54). This ingenious little physics-based puzzler has amassed more Steam play-time in the TPCG offices than almost anything else this month. Everything bar one particularly noteworthy exception to the previously stated rule: *Fallout 3*. Not only is it bigger and better than we could have possibly imagined, it also stands up to its own hype. Titles with this quality are rarer than Super Mutant shit, and it's a game no serious PC gamer should be without. Find out why on page 48. Enjoy the issue!

> "Those five-year dev cycle, big-budget releases can all too often leave a sour taste in our mouths"

Russell Barnes,
Editor

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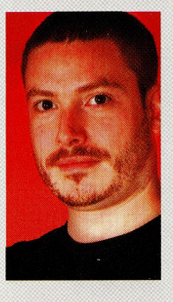
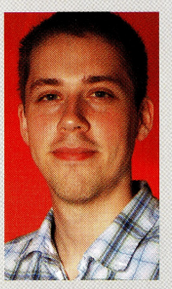
» Meet the team

» Ben Biggs
A Dickensian classic-sized family means Ben has to mortgage his house to fund this Christmas. Only he hasn't got a house – though he has got a spare kidney...
LOVING: *Fallout 3*
WANTING: Level 50 Runekeeper
XMAS: Dialysis machine



» Dan Howdle
Dan's been permanently scarred by the violence of *Call Of Duty: World At War*. So much so that he's now dribbling somewhere in a veteran's hospital with a nurse to change his nappies.
LOVING: *Fallout 3*
WANTING: *Fallout 4*
XMAS: His sanity



» Tom Rudderham
Tom gave himself a headache after experimenting with explosives in *Fallout 3*. The tinnitus was worth it as he simultaneously removed all of his character's limbs.
LOVING: Things that go boom
WANTING: Headphones with less bass
XMAS: A PC port of *Fable II*

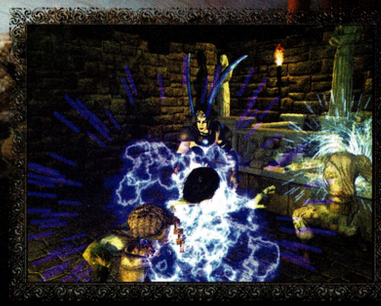
» April Madden
April's already bored of the MMOs of 2008 and is looking forward to 2009. She can't keep her attention on anything for more than ten minutes, that one.
LOVING: *The Chronicles Of Spellborn*
WANTING: *Aion: Tower Of Eternity*
XMAS: Earthsea: The Movie

» Dan Collins
At the time of writing this, Dan has sunk a colossal three hours into *Fallout 3*. If he plays it 12 hours a day for a week, he'll only be a few hours behind Andy. Better get cracking, then...
LOVING: *Gears Of War 2*
WANTING: Christmas
XMAS: A lot

» Andy Salter
Its hard to believe that Andy almost didn't play *Fallout 3*, and it's only because he wanted to watch a film that he decided to install it. Now we can't get him to shut up about it, but at least he's playing something new.
LOVING: *Fallout 3*
WANTING: *Fallout 3* mods
XMAS: *Fallout 3* bobbleheads

"KEEP AN EYE ON THIS
IT'S BIT OF A GEM"
-PC GAMER

FALLEN ANGEL
SACRED 2



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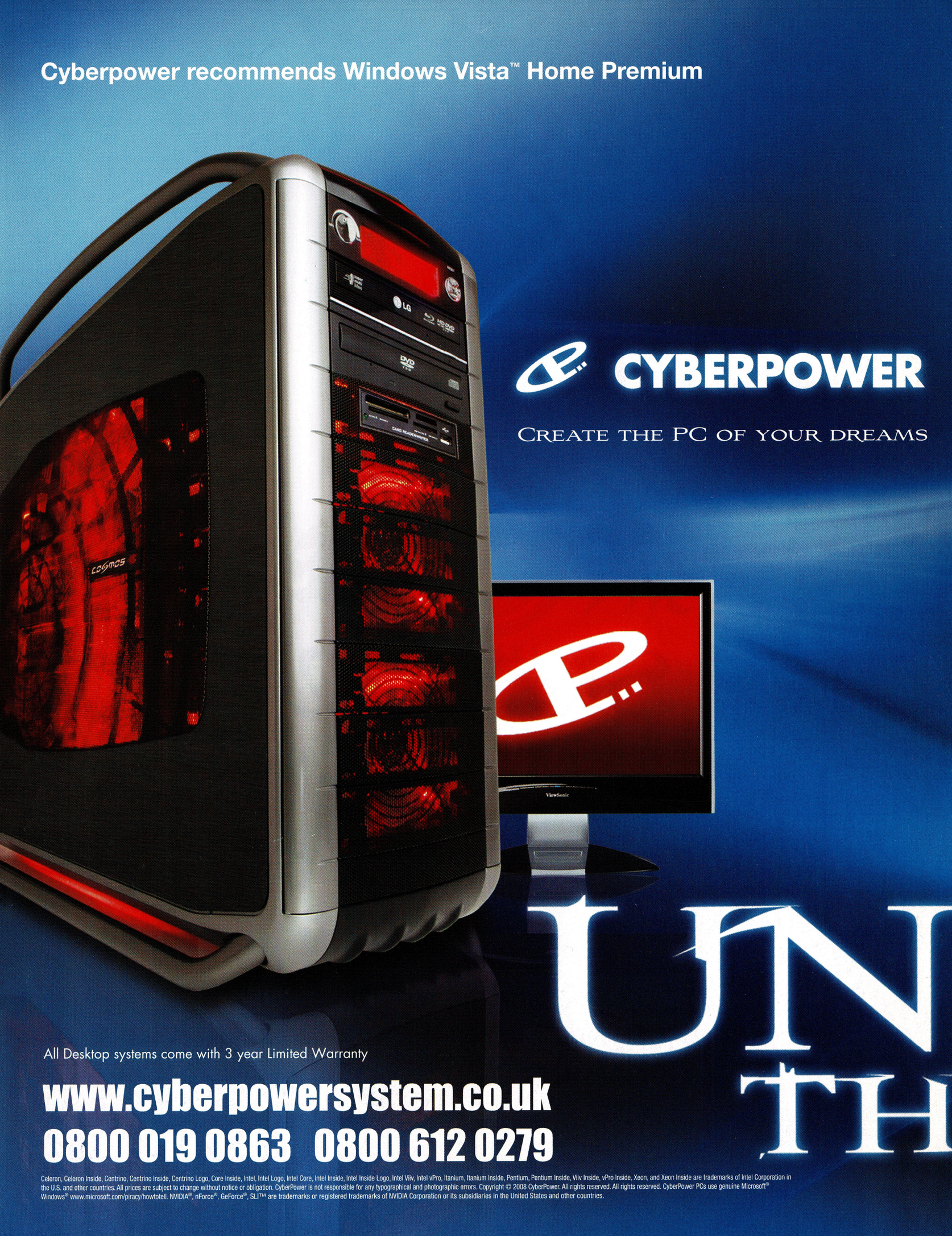
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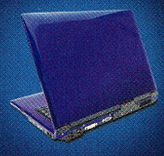

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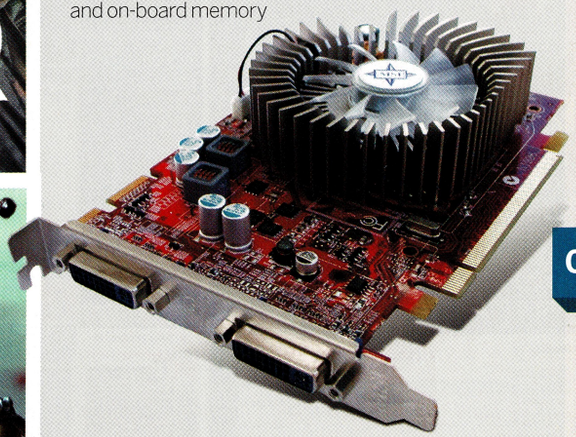

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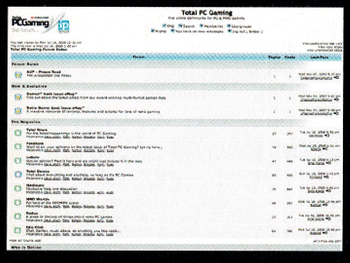

Forum

As well as a growing number of friendly PC gamers, the forum is home to the entire **Total PC Gaming** team. Come and speak to us! Ask us what we're playing, why your PC's not working, how we got into the industry, why Ben's feet smell like his farts... Anything goes.

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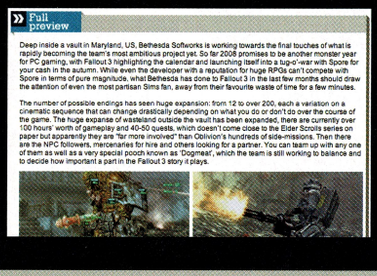

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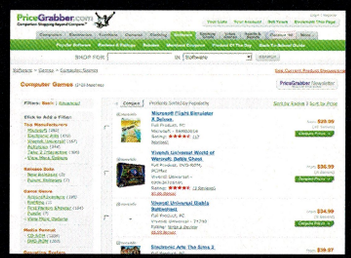

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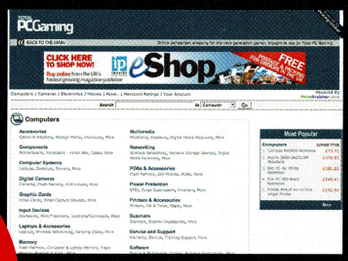

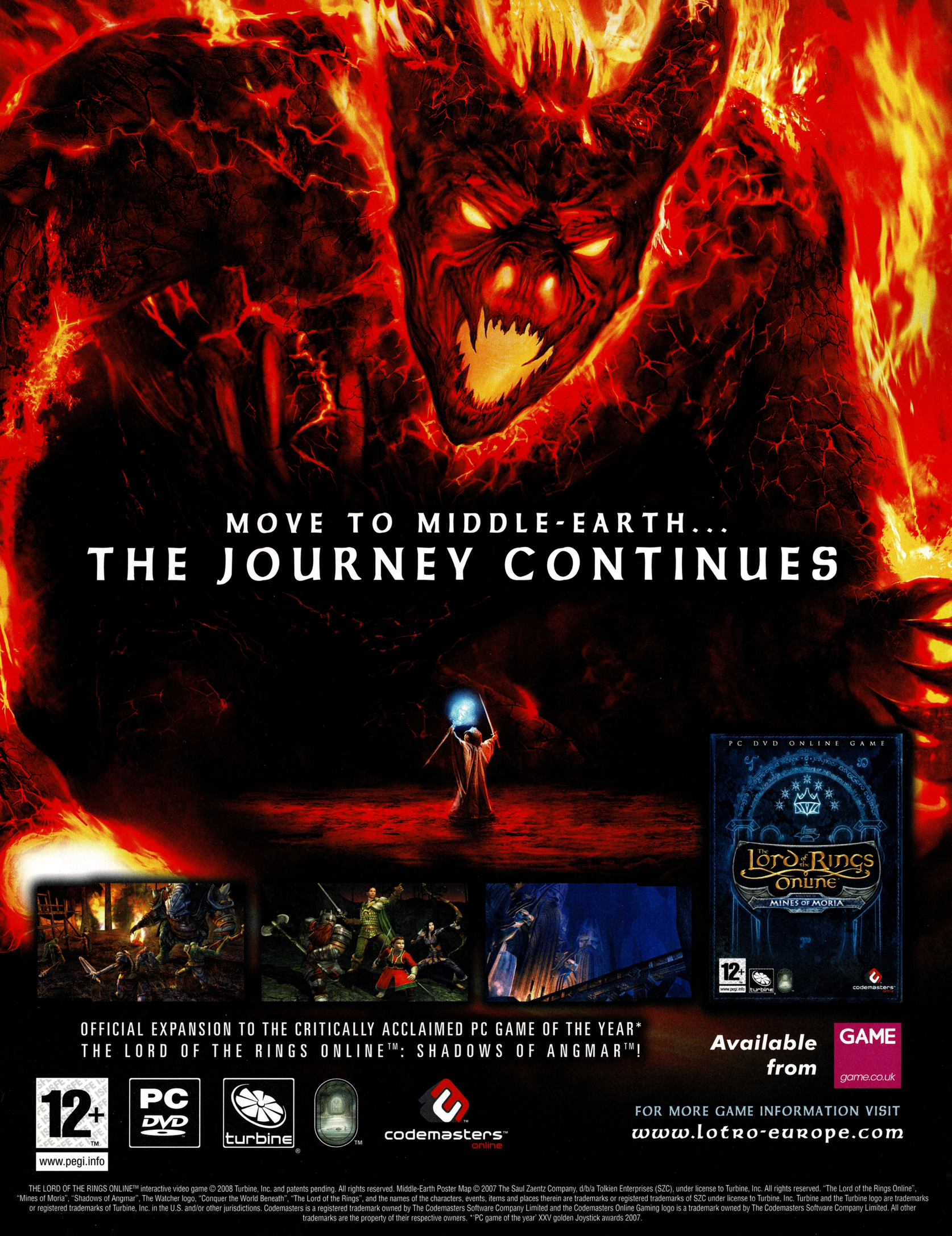

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Topic **Industry**

The PC gaming industry is looking forward to bumper sales in the lead-up to Christmas

A leading high street retailer is expecting a major increase in PC games sales in the approach to Christmas – and says it will look to boost the format with a range of price-cutting promotions.

Mandip Bhachoo, Game's senior buying manager for PC, has told **Total PC Gaming** the stores are expecting one of the best Christmas periods for the format to date.

The firm is pinning its hopes on *World Of Warcraft: Wrath Of The Lich King* and *Command & Conquer Red Alert 3*, as well as titles such as *Spore* and *Fallout 3*. But it hopes special offers on its range of retro budget PC games will prove to be appealing stocking fillers.

"PC gaming is a significant market for Game," says Mandip. "Even with all the technological changes in the last couple of years, customers still want to play on their PCs and laptops. Despite fierce competition from the next-gen consoles, PC game sales are certainly holding their own."

Game on for Christmas

»Shirley it's going to be okay?

The gaming industry has long tried to give an image of being recession-proof, so what are they basing it on?

There's a theory that toys always sell well in recessions. It's called the 'Shirley Temple effect' since, in 1934, Americans hit by the plunging economy flocked to watch *Bright Eyes* at their local fleapit. It was seen as a way of escaping real-life misery.

Today, however, there's no beating a good first-person shooter when the money runs dry, and nowadays, in times of financial crisis, and when the weather takes a turn for the worse, home-based entertainment rules. People may say £40 is a lot of money for a game, but it fares quite well compared to a night on the town or a meal for two. Of course, it provides for more prolonged entertainment, too.

»Pleasure all year round

Shameless plug here, but if you're after a present that offers 12 months of top entertainment with some freebies thrown in for good measure, head over to page 124 where you will find details of our current fantastic subscriber offer.

TOPPING THE CHARTS

The games most likely to be big this Christmas

» Fallout 3

Set in 2277 – that's some 200 years after a nuclear war blasted the globe – *Fallout 3* throws you back into Bethesda's *Mad Max*-esque immersive post-apocalyptic world with all of the glorious, gratuitous violence of the previous two offerings. Let's cut to the chase – you know you're going to get this game, but will it be the Standard, Collector's or Limited Edition version?

» C&C Red Alert 3

Take a parallel universe where the Second World War didn't take place, add the Soviet army marching strong in the Fifties, sprinkle it with the emergence of a Japanese power and what do you get? Full-on real-time strategy slaughter with the lush graphics and attention to detail of the previous games. The Allies, the Soviet Union and the Empire of the Rising Sun pitched in battle... Oh yes!

» Wrath Of The Lich King

Sleepless nights? Irritable? Unable to stop thinking about quests, dungeons, spells and weapons? Come Christmas Day, those feelings look set to get a lot worse. *World Of Warcraft*'s latest expansion pack is undoubtedly going to top the Christmas lists of many a gamer, and with destructible buildings and siege weapons to have a go at, you may as well sell your bed now.

» Although the credit crunch has been biting into global spending power, it has been suggested over the past few months that gaming has been bucking the trend. Game recently posted a record first-half profit of £36.4m, and there will be more stores open than ever before leading up to Christmas this year – 1,300 compared to 1,150 at the same time last year.

Analysts say the PC could emerge strong since the strength of the format lies with its hardcore gamers. A recent study by Enterbrain, the publisher of Japanese games mag, *Famitsu*, suggested the gaming industry wasn't recession-proof, but that casual gaming rather than hardcore would be hardest hit. Another industry expert, Hiroshi Kamide, director of the research department of KBC Securities Japan, added: "If people can't afford to buy Starbucks coffees any more, are they really going to go and buy the next *Brain Training* game?"

It is felt there will be an eventual swing back to hardcore gaming, a more resilient sector, since the people involved are ardent gamers who place their hobby above the majority of their other pastimes. But shops need mainstream buyers too, so expect lots of offers over the next few weeks as gaming shops try to encourage them to buy.

"We're determined to continue to deliver value for money and offer special deals on products that will make great Christmas presents," says Mandip. "We're going to have some great PC games in our Deal of the Week promotions leading up to 25 December and there will be 'two for £25' offers."

He added, "The line-up this Christmas is one of the best we've ever seen, with some phenomenal titles like *World Of Warcraft: Wrath Of The Lich King* and *Command & Conquer Red Alert 3*. We're making sure we'll have a massive range of PC games available, that's for sure."

Game also has around 300 games available to download online. The website bosses have developed an interactive gift selector tool to help gamers chose the perfect presents.

But it will face stiff competition in this area from Valve's Steam, which is also gearing up for the Christmas rush over the coming weeks. Last year, it held a last-minute holiday sale that ran from Christmas Eve until New Year's Day, slashing between 10 and 50 per cent off prices. It brought titles such as *Psychonauts* down to around £5.

The company is keeping tight-lipped over whether or not it will do the same again – it wouldn't want people to hold off buying until the eleventh hour – but we wouldn't bet against it. "We don't want to spoil any surprises," says Valve's PR man Doug Lombardi. The same goes for PopCap games, which dropped prices by 50 per cent over Christmas last year and offered emailable gift certificates. Expect something similar this time around.

But it's fair to say the key competitive battleground will be consoles. Already, the major specialists and the top supermarkets have been engaging in a price battle that has seen the price of an Xbox 360 dip below £130.

Mini feed

ENCORE FOR ENSEMBLE?

Staff at the multi-award winning Ensemble Studios are planning to form a new development studio. It follows Microsoft's decision to shut down Ensemble, which it announced in September. The new firm would handle post-release support for the Xbox 360 game *Halo Wars*, it is claimed, and would most likely work on fresh PC projects.

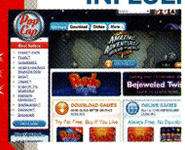
Critics of Microsoft's move said it showed the Redmond giant was focused on console games rather than PC titles. But Bonnie Ross, general manager of the *Halo* business at Microsoft, has said Windows remained a large focus for the company and that, in terms of revenue, it was the largest gaming platform in the world.

BET AND RACE IN BETANDRACE

German developer Vanilla Live Games has announced a new licence for its swelling vehicle ranks in its online gambling racer, *BetAndRace*. The Ford Focus ST, described as "energy in motion" by its manufacturer, wheel spins into the roster alongside the likes of the Volvo C30 T5 and the VW Golf GTI.

BetAndRace is a free-to-play casual arcade racer that allows players to bet virtual currency on winning races in real cars against other players in accurately recreated tracks in real cities. But if you want to up the ante, you can also bet real money from as little as 70 pence, though better player can win big in regular tournaments. Download it free at **www.betandrace.com**.

CASUALLY INFLUENCED



What does Shigeru Miyamoto, Rob Pardo, and Mike Morhaime have in common? They have all influenced the gaming brains at PopCap. Greg Canessa, vice-president of videogame platforms, told **Total PC Gaming**: "We look up to designers who excel in balancing simple and engaging gameplay with play depth in their designs. Miyamoto-san has demonstrated to the world time and time again that it is possible to create simple, engaging and highly addictive game experiences that are approachable to casual gamers and still rewarding for hardcore fans. Rob Pardo and Mike Morhaime have design principals and ideals that have also served as inspiration to PopCap."

Mini feed

SIERRA OFF-LINE

Sierra shut down 21 of its dedicated gaming servers on 1 November, with *Homeworld*, *Caesar IV* and *No One Lives Forever 2* among them. The company hasn't given a reason, but the age of the games suggests they have reached a natural end.

Sierra is owned by Activision Blizzard, which wants to relaunch the brand with new IP. Removing the old franchises may be a way of starting afresh. The games affected are: *Alien Vs Predator*, *Arcanum*, *Caesar IV*, *Dark Reign 2*, *Emperor: Rise Of The Middle Kingdom*, *Empire Earth*, *Empire Earth 2*, *Empire Earth: Age Of Conquest*, *Ground Control*, *Ground Control 2*, *Homeworld*, *Homeworld: Cataclysm*, *NOLF2*, *Red Baron*, *Sanity*, *Star Trek: Armada*, *SWAT3: EE*, *SWAT3: GOTY*, *The Incredible Machine*, *Tribes2* and *Vampire*.

POWER OF THE MIND

Square Enix has had a brain wave. It has teamed up with NeuroSky on a new creation that lets gamers control their play using their thoughts instead of a keyboard or joystick. Put on display at the Tokyo Game Show, PC game sci-fi first-person shooter *Judecca* – a game not due to be released any time soon – showed that you can slip on the NeuroSky Mindset helmet and start firing. A sensor reaches out from the helmet and sits on the player's forehead, detecting electrical activity in the player's left frontal lobe. Enemies can only been seen accurately when the player relaxes. NeuroSky is hoping to put the unit on sale – in America at least – next spring for around £50.

BANISHED INTO ETERNITY?

Luc Bernard's PC game, *Eternity's Child*, may have received a hostile response from some gamers following its release on Steam, but it hasn't put him off from pursuing further projects. As reported in **Total PC Gaming** a few months back, he is planning a controversial PC game based on the Holocaust, but before he tackles that sensitive subject, he is going to be producing games for the iPhone. "*Imagination Is The Only Escape* is still going ahead," he says. "It'll be out for PC as well as the iPhone, DSWare and WiiWare. I'm still seeing what works best since the game needs to be released perfectly or it will just be a joke."

Topic **Industry**

PC GAMING CAN BE THE BEDROCK OF EXPERIMENTATION

Indie developer Tale of Tales is determined to fly the flag for those on the fringe

It's a familiar game: name five famous Belgians. It's a familiar answer: umm, err, aaah. It's also a massive disservice to the country of bureaucracy and chocolate, because in some quarters of this much-slighted land, there are some real thinkers – people who are just as innovative as the Will Wrights, Keita Takahashis and Alexey Pajitnovs of our digital world.

Michaël Samyn and Auriea Harvey are two of them, the co-founders of the Tale of Tales development studio that produced the fresh online multiplayer game *The Endless Forest*. Currently hard at work with a short horror game called *The Path* that is set to be released in 2009, Michaël and Auriea are indie developers... but not by choice.

"The game just turned out that way because the videogames industry has little commercial interest in what we do," says Samyn. "And even within the indie videogames scene, as far as we know it, we're not very typical."

The Path will be made commercially available on the PC, and it's billed as having a unique form of gameplay and a dark theme. Tale of Tales has looked to film as one source of inspiration, but only to place the game into some kind of contextualisation. It's a game on the fringe that is sure to attract a cult audience.

"The mere existence of an indie scene is crucial to gaming," says Michaël. "It creates an environment where experiments can happen. Sadly, there is not much support for experiments coming from the commercial industry, even though research and experimentation are vital to its survival and expansion."

At the end of October, the IndieCade festival showcased the talents of the world's independent game scene during Nottingham's GameCity.

Topic **Software** BullGuard creates anti-virus package for gamers

MAXIMUM SECURITY

We are sometimes a tad suspicious of surveys, especially ones put out by a company to bolster claims that it has created a marvellous package. But this one we could believe: Bullguard says a fifth of gamers have been found to use no security at all. Given the sheer avalanche of viruses just waiting to eat away at our systems, this is indeed alarming.

So what to do? Well, BullGuard has created a Gamer's Edition, which it says is the world's most advanced dedicated security solution for gamers. It's aimed at those who play online (just about all of us nowadays) and it offers discreet security in the background. Gone are the days when you'll receive endless firewall messages or see your security package eating up your system's resources.

Indeed, that same survey found that 80 per cent of gamers find their security software interferes with their gaming. What BullGuard Gamer's Edition does is automatically switch to an optimised game profile – essentially firewall and anti-virus settings – when it recognises a supported game. Messaging is halted for the duration of the game, no updates are initiated and only a minimal amount of resources will be taken up.

Theis Søndergaard, BullGuard's CTO and co-founder said: "We currently support 80 of the most popular games in the world, including *World Of Warcraft* and *Age Of Conan*, and this number will increase as new games are released to the market.

The Gamer's Edition also comes with a Spamfilter and a backup component. And, best of all, you can check out the trial version on this month's cover DVD.

It was the second year it has done so and it provides a perfect way for smaller developers to get their work known, highlighting titles such as *Escape From Woomera*, *Global Conflicts: Palestine* and *Everyday Shooter*.

"The commercial games industry has only recently started paying attention to the indie games," says Auriea. "Mostly, I think, because they need small, cheap games to fill their online channels. But I think it is very sad that there is not more experimentation going on in the indie scene. Indie games are often even more hardcore than the commercial ones."

She continues: "You just have to make your games stand out and use your imagination more. This is not happening commercially so we must ensure it goes on independently."

Go to **tale-of-tales.com/theendlessforest** to find out more about the game.

WIN A COLLECTOR'S EDITION SACRED 2 BOXSET!

Ever fancied playing as an angel in an RPG? Not the white robes and halo garden variety, but a kinky Seraphim with a suspiciously sci-fi look and badass in battle. Yes, Ascaron has returned with a sequel to the popular PC title, *Sacred*. It's called *Sacred 2: Fallen Angel*, and while we'd encourage you to check out its iconic character, you're by no means forced to play this particular race or role. In fact, *Sacred 2* is very open, big and *Diablo*-esque in its execution – check out our review on page 52.

You can buy *Sacred 2: Fallen Angel* from any retailer for £34.99 or invest in a collector's edition of the game, complete with exclusive online pet, a double-sided poster map, official art book, soundtrack, tattoos (!) and DVD containing elite graphics updates for high-end PC systems, all for £39.99. Alternatively, you can enter our competition to win one of five collector's editions by answering the following question:

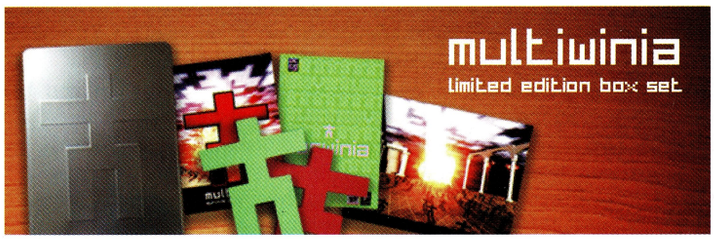
Which of these isn't an angel?

a Gabriel
b Cherubim
c Russell Brand

Send your answers to tpcg@imagine-publishing.co.uk with 'Sacred 2 competition' in the subject header. Closing date is 24 December 2008.

Competition rules 1. All entries must be received by 24 December 2008. 2. There is no cash alternative. 3. The publisher's decision is final and no correspondence will be entered into. 4. No employee of Imagine Publishing Ltd or any company with products on offer within this competition is eligible to enter. 5. Only one entry per person per competition. 6. By entering, competitors agree to be bound by the rules and requirements of the competition. 7. You may be sent news about products and opportunities from related companies. If you do not wish to receive such information, please state as such on your entry.

multiwinia LIMITED EDITION TIN BOXSET



Indie developer Introversion's latest addition to its back catalogue is *Multiwinia: Survival Of The Flattest*, the critically acclaimed sequel to the original hit, *Darwinia*. The retro *Tron*-style real-time strategy has moved on from the solo play of its predecessor and introduces a less story-driven, but rabidly fast-paced single and multiplayer game. *Multiwinia* uses the same basic RTS conventions as before, but has added a few new features to spice up the gameplay, including new power-ups and drops, Multiwinian formations, 40 new maps and six different multiplayer game modes.

To celebrate Christmas, Introversion has released a festively themed demo of *Multiwinia* featuring a not-so-small tribute to Total PC Gaming, which you can find in the demos section on this issue's cover DVD. You can buy and download the full version of *Multiwinia: Survival Of The Flattest* on Steam or, for the connoisseur, you can buy the *Multiwinia* limited edition tin box. The set includes the CD version of the game, CD version of *Darwinia*, coffee table artbook, two foam Darwinians and eight Multiwinia versus Darwinia postcards and can be bought in the online Introversion store (**store.introversion.co.uk**). Alternatively, you can enter our competition for the chance to win one of five *Multiwinia* tin boxes.

Which of these is a theory of evolution?

a Survival of the flattest
b Survival of the fittest
c Survival of the fattest

Send your answers to tpcg@imagine-publishing.co.uk with 'Multiwinia competition' in the subject header. Closing date is 24 December 2008.

Competition rules 1. All entries must be received by 24 December 2008. 2. There is no cash alternative. 3. The publisher's decision is final and no correspondence will be entered into. 4. No employee of Imagine Publishing Ltd or any company with products on offer within this competition is eligible to enter. 5. Only one entry per person per competition. 6. By entering, competitors agree to be bound by the rules and requirements of the competition. 7. You may be sent news about products and opportunities from related companies. If you do not wish to receive such information, please state as such on your entry.

'Wild' Bill Stealey

IS SOMETHING EVIL LURKING IN THE DARK?

Nah, it's just Wild Bill Stealey, the man who founded MicroProse and is set to launch Thriller Publishing

Las Vegas. 1982. Bill Stealey is sitting in a company meeting at the MGM Grand Hotel, with layers of dust pirouetting to the jarring accompaniment of talk from the speaker at the front of the room and the scraping of bodies on seats as people slide sleepily towards the floor.

Next to him is Sid Meier, his head cascading downwards, waiting for inspiration to hit. Then it does. Sid invites Bill to slip out of the room and pop downstairs with him, the cold air of the lobbies suddenly perking their spirits.

Looming into view is the coin-op game room with a flight simulator called *The Red Baron*, and the pair gaze at it momentarily before deciding to have a go. "I can create a better game than that," says Sid, and Bill challenges him to do it. "If you do," he tells his friend, "I could sell it." A few weeks later, Sid produces *Hellcat Ace* and it goes on to become the first game Bill will sell. A new company, MicroProse, is born, and Bill and Sid make millions.

More than 25 years later and Bill is on the verge of another stab at videogames. He may have sold MicroProse in 1993 – a company that made a star of Sid and created a wealth of top titles, from *Rollercoaster Tycoon* to *Civilization* – and he may be 61 years old, but he is set to rekindle the MicroProse magic all over again. He's not alone in his dream, either.

Joining him in the venture, which Bill has called Thriller Games (**www.thrillergames.com**), are all of the executives who ran MicroProse in the days when it developed and published *F-15 Strike Eagle, F-117A Stealth Fighter, M1 Tank Platoon, Silent Service, Gunship, Grand Prix* and *Civilization*. The only person missing is Sid Meier. "But we'd love to have him back," says Bill. "Who wouldn't?"

Bill Stealey on... **stepping back** "You've got to let people do their thing and when you have talented programmers, you don't like to interfere"

To have Sid on board at Thriller Games would be a major coup, and you wouldn't bet against Stealey trying to secure his signature. At a time when the MicroProse name has been relaunched by a different company that is selling electronic equipment and videogames, Bill is trying to resurrect the thrill of those earlier days under a fresh banner. And one of the things he wants to focus on is military gaming. It was his passion in the Eighties and remains so to this very day.

"We believe there's a void in the market for some of the military products that MicroProse did so well," says Stealey, who calls himself Wild Bill. "We're also in a great position to fill that. There are many military guys working with us both on our board and as our advisors. At the last count we had two Generals and four Lt Colonels on our team. They are all US Air Force Academy graduates and three are ex-fighter pilots."

Bill Stealey is a military man himself. As well as running MicroProse, using the business acumen he had learned as a student at Wharton Business School of the University of Pennsylvania – one of the top three business schools in the US – he had a side career as a fighter pilot with the US Air Force Reserve. But while you would think his background and intelligence may have made him brash and arrogant, in reality, he's far more complex: ferociously bright, demanding and direct but funny and passionate, too.

Right now, he's happy. He's doing what he does best – taking an idea and just going with it. "You have to make decisions and stick with them," he says. "There are people who over-analyse and never make decisions, and those are the ones who never do what they want to do.

The military training has ensured those decisions come quick and fast. And anybody who has ever dealt with Stealey – who lost friends and classmates in Vietnam – will soon know of his background. At the first Consumer Electronic Shows, he used to wear his military uniform. Now, with the emphasis on fighting flight sims, it may well just get a dusting off.

"We have great contacts in the military, and we believe that military first-person shooter-type games are one of the largest and fastest growing segments of the game market," says Bill. "It's important that we enter a sector of the market that we know we can succeed in. We want to be where the future is and that's massively multiplayer online games. We want to be where the biggest segments are, so we're concentrating on first-person shooter action. But above all, we want to be where we have expertise, and that's where the military background comes in."

Bill Stealey on... **success** "When I was with MicroProse, there was one time in the Eighties, if memory serves me correct, when we had 11 of the top 20 games"

Selected Bill Stealey gameography 1983-1997

» Solo Flight 1983

» Silent Service 1985

» Crusade in Europe 1985

» Gunship 1986

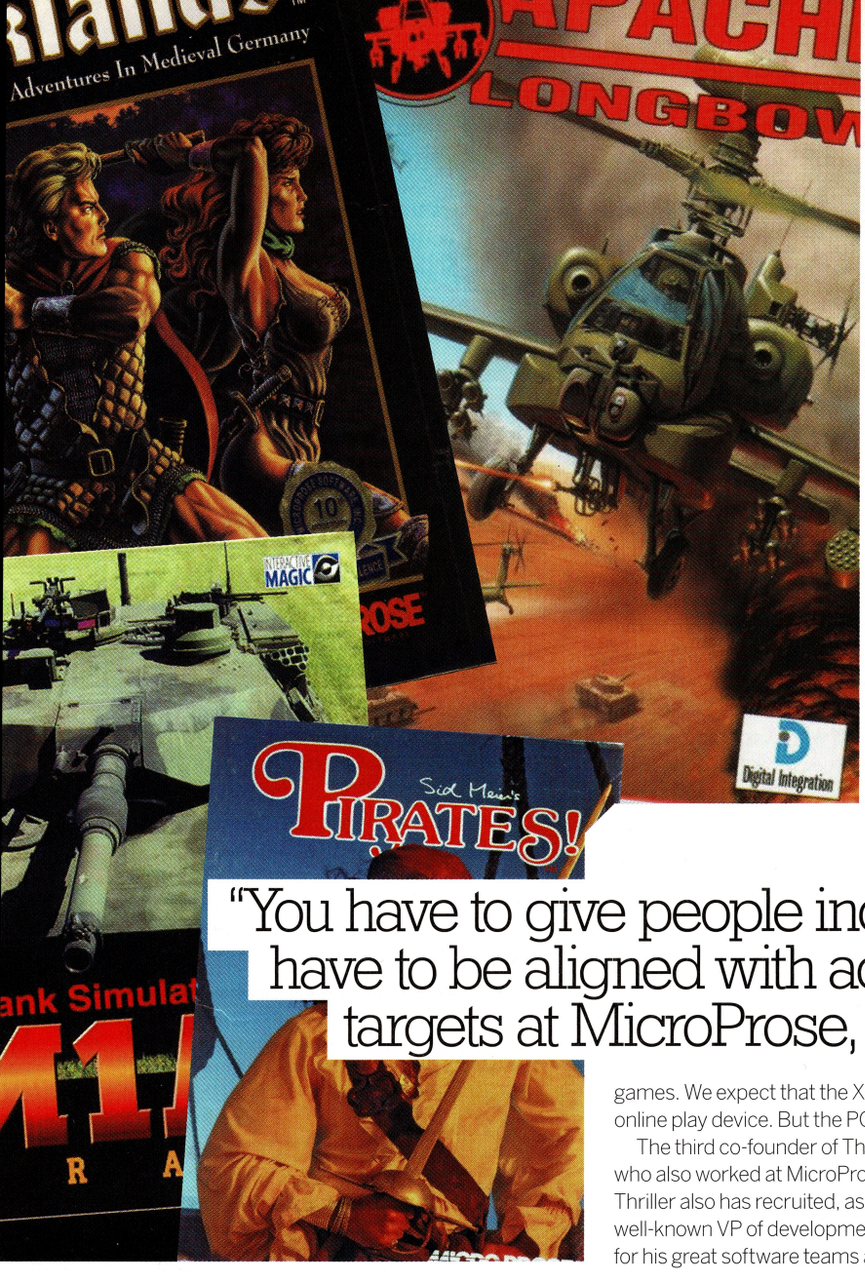
» Airborne Ranger 1987

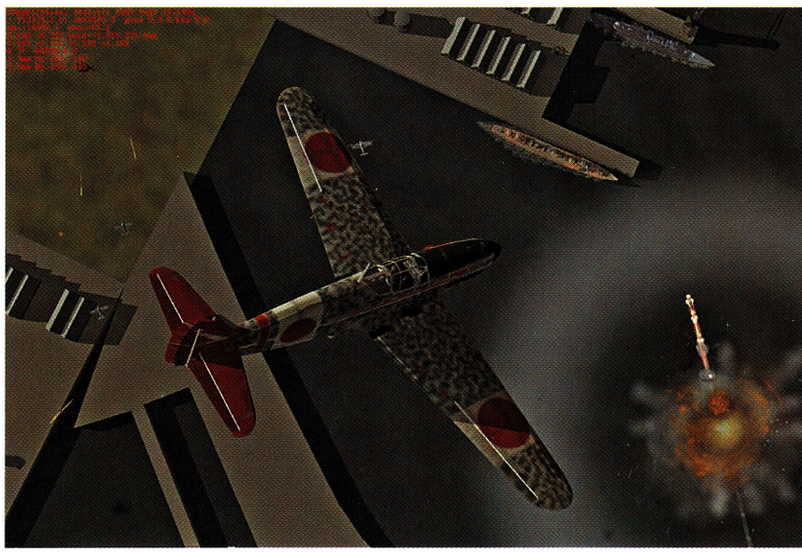
» Red Storm Rising 1988

» F-19 Stealth Fighter 1988

» M1 Tank Platoon 1989

» Sid Meier's Railroad Tycoon 1990





Bill Stealey on... **motivating staff**

"You have to give people incentives, and those incentives have to be aligned with accomplishment. If people met targets at MicroProse, we'd give them more money"

It helps, of course, that Bill and Thriller CEO Fred Schmidt have been managing and operating MMOs for at least five years. Indeed, Stealey runs the online game, *WarBirds*, which can be played at www.totalsims.com. "Schmidt and I both like the recurring revenues and the retail revenues that can be generated from great MMO products," he says.

Thriller Games will focus exclusively on MMOs. It will produce military and espionage-themed games in the first-person shooter, action-adventure, strategy and simulation game genres. While Stealey wants Thriller's games to appear on consoles, the core format is set to be the PC.

"We know that the best MMO games currently operate only on PCs," says Stealey. "We think PCs are critical to MMO game success. We believe that, in the future, other consoles and devices will also allow players to connect to our online games. We believe the PlayStation 3 and mobile phones are currently viable platforms to connect to online games. We expect that the Xbox will also become an online play device. But the PC is critical."

The third co-founder of Thriller Games is Jim Bull, who also worked at MicroProse as the head of sales. Thriller also has recruited, as a fourth founder, a well-known VP of development, who is well known for his great software teams and products and will be announced shortly. All could have simply retired, but have chosen to carry on. It is time for them to have some fun and pursue interests close to them. Indeed, fun is what they believe gaming is all about.

Not that Stealey believes gaming should be built on frivolous foundations. Thriller is set to draw on the literary world for inspiration. "We have engaged three best-selling authors," he says. "We have not announced their names yet, but we have one author who has worked on more than 47 best-selling military science fiction games. We have licensed nine of his best books so we can make a series of four MMO games each moving his story along with new characters, new challenges, and new worlds in which to fight and play.

"We have two other authors creating original intellectual properties for us in military subjects. One is focused on spy and espionage. The other is *Delta Force Commando*-type action. Each of these authors will write five novels with the same main characters so we can make a whole series of games based on these books. Think *Call Of Duty* one to five from each of these authors."

And this is where Thriller's marketing expertise comes into its own. Nowadays, it's not enough to simply create a game. Books, movies, board and card games, toys and so on are just as important, and it is into these areas that Thriller will expand.

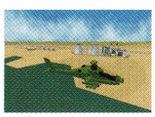
"We have so much experience of gaming," says Stealey. "We were creating games that fit into as little as 64 kilobytes of space. For us, it's about simple, elegant design that can entertain but harness the benefit of technology today. What we've found is that solid story arcs and empathetic character development is important today, and that's why we want our stories to be told by proven storytellers. Some of our products may well be a bit retro but with great graphics, great stories, great gameplay and great fun. For us, it's a winner."

David Crookes

The Next Frontier

» Wild Bill has got that look in his eyes. He's about to tread new ground while paying homage to times gone by. And so he's opening the door to more military and espionage-themed games, all of them multiplayer and spread across a variety of genres from FPS, to strategy and simulation to action-adventure games.

» Darklands 1992

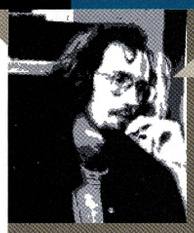


» Apache 1995

» iM1A2 Abrams 1997

Due in 2009» Novel games Games have long taken their influences from movies but Thriller Publishing is more interested in literature. So among the first MMO games to be produced by this new software house will be one based on the work of a published best-selling author. Quite who, Wild Bill won't divulge just yet. But already, Thriller is thinking of an entire game series and even turning the whole lot into a film.

Due in 2010 » More, more, more More MMOs. More book-based games. More military and espionage. Never let it be said that Thriller is going to be a one-trick pony, though. The years of experience these guys have, and given their massive success in making MicroProse one of the best-loved developers ever, there's sure to be a gem or two emerging over the next year or so.



Kelly Wand

Arbitrary Glossolalia #14:

Warhammer Online: The first 30 days

Sweet as I've always been on board games, Warhammer never wooed me, not even during my brief dutiful teenage flirtation with D&D (if you wore glasses and went to high school in the Eighties, at least one session was mandatory). I simply didn't gravitate to it. I don't like painting small (or big) things. Those grass battlemats smelled too musty and 'chemical-y' to evoke the medieval. Why couldn't these grognard sticklers for 'realism' just use actual grass or at least grass-smelling polyurethane? Complicated rules-systems were a crutch. Collecting all those pewter figurines looked expensive. Anyone who played it sounded insane.

So while initially enthused about *Warhammer Online*, its Warhammer-ness didn't mean much to me, and six weeks ago the idea of starting yet another fantasy MMO so soon after *Conan*'s fizzling groin-punches seemed beyond my stomach-lining. I watched my brother play the *Warhammer* beta. It looked just like *LOTRO*, only foggier. Good. I had stuff to do anyway. And *Lich King*'s coming out.

Warhammer came out. I dithered. A week later, my friend reported that it was the greatest game ever. He said it felt like an old friend because he'd been a 'gamemaster' back in high school. I asked him for 'gamemaster' details. "Well," he said thoughtfully, "there are special rules for when your army's driven off the edge of the table." Damn. So I bought *Warhammer Online*.

It has issues. The usual server stability/constant rolling restart-isms. The public quests that, however conveniently located, nobody does twice. The fact that I can't tell at a glance what classes many of my opponents are, just a mob of jerks in white capes. How I have to sometimes click repeatedly to target or cast. The fact that I can lose so lopsidedly to a healer six levels lower even when I have the drop on him, because the little f**k never, ever runs out of mana/action points. That eligibility for battleground scenarios is level-based so you 'graduate' past getting to replay the great early ones. The pussified T-rated bloodlessness. The cloistered, linear cul-de-sacs throughout the wilderness, with sprawling panoramas restricted primarily to already laggeriffic capital cities.

But its seductions are legion. The clever writing, the poetic/gruesome itemisation, the laid-back fart humour, the atmospheric sound design, the chaotic crunchy battle din, the sheer variety of quests and geography. I love the open hostility between factions and the sense that there's an actual war going on, an aspect *WOW* soft-pedals and domesticates. I love the unabashed emphasis on PvP right out the gate at Level 1 and how every blow you land in PvP battle subtly affects conditions in the game world. I dig the bitter racial enmity, how you can queue up for any and all of the battlegrounds from anywhere (although the wait times are curiously longer than you'd expect), how your quest locations are handily marked in red on your minimap and that you can open and close your journal from there. All the ways it goes out of its way to eliminate tedium. I love my class (the barefoot skull-faced magus), from the feline hisses and splorts of his pets to his omnipresent spiky surf-disc mandala. I salute its unpredictability, where in my gloomy capital the Inevitable City some merchant hires me to collect a purple mushroom from the floor of a massive gladiatorial arena nearby where elite Statue of Liberty-sized giants try to step on me. I love all the different point-bars of various colours always ticking steadily upward independently, so you're always levelling and choosing a reward. How it rewards you for talking to NPCs or 'exploring' the side of a cliff (table-edge, rather) – basically, just for showing up. I love how there's zero consequences for dying.

It's hard to predict an MMO's interest sustainability. I loved *Conan* and *Pirates* at the start, so clearly I can't be trusted. As with *Conan*, I'm uncertain if *Warhammer* has an endgame. There don't seem to be non-PvP instances or raids – admittedly the most static, conventional MMO trappings by far, but what's in their place?

> "I watched my brother play the Warhammer beta. It looked just like LOTRO, only foggier. Good. I had stuff to do anyway"

For all EA's marketing power and the game's innovations, I predict *Warhammer Online* is ultimately too esoteric and micro-intensive to dethrone *WOW*. An MMO needs to appeal to young girls for that, or, in *LOTRO*'s case, rural grandmas. But EA's market share isn't my concern. Unlike *Conan*, *Warhammer Online* delivers what it promises: a piquant, addictive alternative to *WOW*'s traditional grist (Blizzard's heavily Warhammer-pirated lore notwithstanding). I haven't yet coated my keyboard with Astroturf, but it's on the list.

Kelly Wand is the author of numerous award-winning* game reviews, columns, short stories, plays and scripts. He's based in LA but considers its weather, like the Wii, overrated. *Except for the 'award' part

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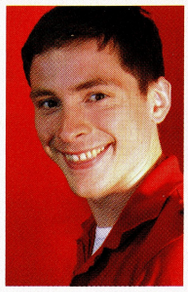

» Answered by
Ben Biggs
Ben recently learned how to execute a perfect spinning roundhouse kick, which is almost as much fun as playing games, except if you're Russell who prefers *Fallout 3*. Especially now he's eating through a straw.

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Ever crammed several elephants into a small room? Neither have we, but keeping up with top PC titles is hard enough when your hardware's up to scratch, let alone when your machine's a relic...

TPCG Podcast 5
The **Total PC Gaming** team reveal their top picks from the biggest games of the year. And stuff.

Family upgrade

Dear **TPCG**,
We have a baby on the way, and much to my distress, the temple of gaming that is our spare bedroom is to become a nursery. I am out on my ear with my PC in tow. Basically, this means the PC needs replacing with a laptop that I can use anywhere in the house. I am bewildered by the plethora of processors, graphics cards and other miscellaneous specifications on offer. Could you please help me understand what I should be looking for in a laptop? I currently play *World Of Warcraft* (which is about as much as my PC will handle), but am itching to try *Age Of Conan* – is there a laptop capable of playing that? I've heard rumours of another *Alien Vs Predator* game coming out, so a certain amount of future-proofing would be needed.
Kimball Hutchinson, via email

TPCG: Getting a laptop capable of running the latest games isn't really the issue here, as there are plenty that are more than capable of dealing with *Age Of Conan* and its ilk. But the rule of thumb for any desktop replacement system is that it's going to cost around twice that of its space-hogging counterpart. Ignore the flashy peripherals such as Blu-ray drives and the multimedia laptop equivalents of the Swiss army knife, and look for gaming muscle, like the Alienware m15x reviewed in TPCG issue 12. Alternatively, you can save money and space by buying and furnishing a portable mini ATX case for half the price of a good gaming laptop.

Clear off Clear Sky

I have read your review of *Clear Sky* and cannot believe you gave it a 9. This has to be one of the most bug-ridden games I have ever played, which is a shame as I rate the original *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* as the best FPS ever. *Clear Sky* has a badly weighted combat system where crack-shot opponents can hit you at 50+ yards with a mediocre pistol and kill you after five or six hits, but you have to empty two full clips of a sub-machine-gun into them at almost point-blank range before they fall over. I have restarted this game four times now, and so far I've had one trader (at *CS* base) fall over dead twice while trading (nobody noticed). Now all my traders except Sid have vanished. The swamp isn't even a swamp as you can wade across all of the water. Some of the stashes are in places you cannot get to, like the one in a roof in dark valley.

I could go on, but the list would be too long. So far none of the patches have rectified any of the problems I have had, and the forums so far haven't any solutions either.

As it is now, this game barely rates a 4. If they ever get it properly patched and running smoothly it would be a good (but not great) game. Until then, keep clear.
Phil Harris, via email

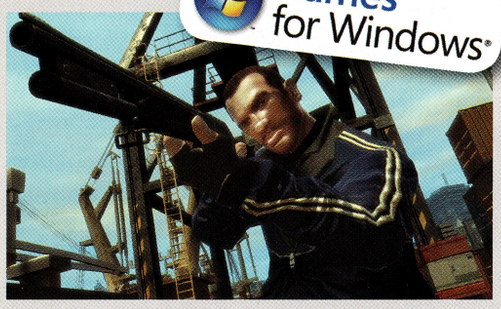
The giveaway
Two gigs good, four gigs better: a Corsair Twin 2x 4096 6400C5DHX RAM kit, to be precise, which goes to the letter of the month this month. It's entry-level RAM for anyone serious about gaming in Vista.

TPCG: None of us at **TPCG** have experienced any of these problems, especially since the most recent patch – perhaps a fresh reinstallation of the game and patches would help? *Clear Sky* certainly doesn't lead you by the hand, which is partly why we liked it so much. None of the stashes (including the one on the dark valley roof) we've found are unobtainable, but some require a sharp eye and a bit of thought. Some mutants and groups of enemies are very tough, but nothing a specific weapon upgrade and a well-conceived strategy won't solve. And we're bemused by your notion

LETTER OF THE MONTH

In the last couple of years a phenomenon has arisen in the PC industry. Hold onto your hats, folks, because Microsoft is doing games for Windows! Can you imagine that?! One day we were all browsing the Internet, tapping away on Word and happily subscribing to the Official Vista magazine for the latest guff on the most recent piece of bloatware, or how to organise our lives around an operating system, and now we can use our PCs to do what console gamers have been doing since year zero! Who'd have thought it was possible!

So my sarcastic line may well be a result of my ignorance, but what is this Games For Windows really all about? Why is this curiously generic strap adorning the top of many of my favourite retail titles and more importantly, what has a Games For Windows title got that a non-GFW game hasn't? Forgive me for being cynical, but the many years I've been gaming on the PC prior to GFW has taught me not to believe that everything Microsoft do will benefit me. I have a strong suspicion that this brand is nothing more than a way for Microsoft to reinforce its association with PC gaming and a way to perpetuate its more profitable retail line.
Rufus Pratchett, via email



TPCG: Microsoft tells us the Games For Windows brand guarantees four things: quality, compatibility, safety features and a game that's easy to play (ie simple to install, find and remove). In practical terms, the important part for lifelong PC gamers is the compatibility bit, which guarantees XP and Vista compatibility, widescreen support, 360 gamepad and wireless dongle support where appropriate. But generally speaking, this is foolproof branding for PC games in the age of the casual gamer. Check out the details on www.gamesforwindows.com.

Rufus, you've bagged yourself a Corsair Twin 2x4096 6400C5DHX RAM kit, so if you've not upgraded to Vista already, perhaps it's time to test that GFW guarantee out?

"Hold onto your hats, folks, because Microsoft is doing games for Windows!"

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This month's greatest hits Topics

Everything you need to know!

Are you guys talking about www.totalpcgaming.com? I've heard it's packed with information about PC gaming. Am I right? Are we discussing www.totalpcgaming.com, I thought I read something about www.totalpcgaming.com. I may have been mistaken, but you really should check out www.totalpcgaming.com!

zero1979

Player Housing

Another good feature for TPCG is player housing. You could mention the MMOs that have it, the differences between them and the pros and cons. Also I would like to mention to stick with player housing and not go into some farting talk.

Immortallium

PC Zone's staff walkout

Biggles, you're so awesome, has anyone ever told you that? I imagine they have, but let me reiterate it.

faselei

Have you overclocked your rig?

Overclocking is a bit like going to the gym – you keep adding weights till it hurts. When the pain gets too great you stop or something breaks. In the case of a CPU, it's heat not pain. As you push the CPU it will start to make mistakes, so you need to raise the power and this will increase the waste heat and, in the end, melt it. So the key to overclocking is to keep the heat down.

Defenceless Old Lady

Shalebridge Cradle level of Thief 3

And I had a genuine jaw-dropping, ass-clenching, eye-bulging flinch of terror when I heard the words "I can hear you breathing..."

jezcentral

Polls

Get voting!

In the run-up to Christmas we want to know what games you'll be playing over the festive period. Stuffing turkey and downing sherry doesn't count.

www.totalpcgaming.com/forum

that the swamp isn't a swamp... here's the Wikipedia definition: "A swamp is a wetland featuring temporary or permanent inundation of large areas of land, by shallow bodies of water."

Crysis crisis

I've recently bought the latest *Crysis* offering, *Crysis Warhead*, as I'd enjoyed the original. At the end of the installation I got the SecuROM prompt. After my initial outburst of expletives, I checked the box cover and spotted in very small print 'internet connection required to activate product'.

My games PC is only about six months old and cost more than I'd be prepared to admit, but it can play all the latest offerings with all the bells and whistles set to Max. The reason it's not connected to the internet is because I don't play MMORPGs, and I don't want to slow the PC down with all the usual software rubbish that's required for internet usage.

Now come along these fanatical game producers/distributors that want their loyal customers to jump through hoops. The method they have put in place now means you can't install a game on a non-internet PC, why? I can install Microsoft's OS with a quick phone call to register, why not for games? And then games hackers have cracked the security within one day of release, so only the legal purchaser is penalised. Don't these companies realise they are only alienating the paying customer. It's certainly one way of killing off PC games.

Clive Bowler, via email

GFW Live
I'm a little surprised that Microsoft hasn't tried to tie in *Call Of Duty: World At War* or *F.E.A.R. 2: Project Origin* into the Live service, as both games are going to be released under the Games For Windows platform.

Rainier Wolfcastle?
This issue is the best one ever. But back to my point, as it's my birthday with all the pressies I got, your mag was the last thing that I looked at, and when I saw 'free *Red Alert*' I was whooping with joy.

TPCG: It could be, but we doubt it. An alternative, Stuart Campbell school of thought would be that it could result in the rise of the PC as the dominant gaming platform. The thrust of the 'Can piracy save the PC?' feature (see issue 9, page 42) was that big publishers are committing commercial suicide by shackling their big-budget derivative games to expensive and draconian DRM, forcing people to download pirate versions, while indie game developers reap the benefits from their affordable and original titles.

Also, a gaming PC that's not connected to the internet? Assuming that connecting is an option you choose not to take, you're making an awful lot of work for yourself, what with patching and updating, not to speak of the online content included in most games.

But we agree with the issue at the heart of your letter, Clive, and maybe one way to deal with intrusive DRM is to make a noise online and vote with your wallet.

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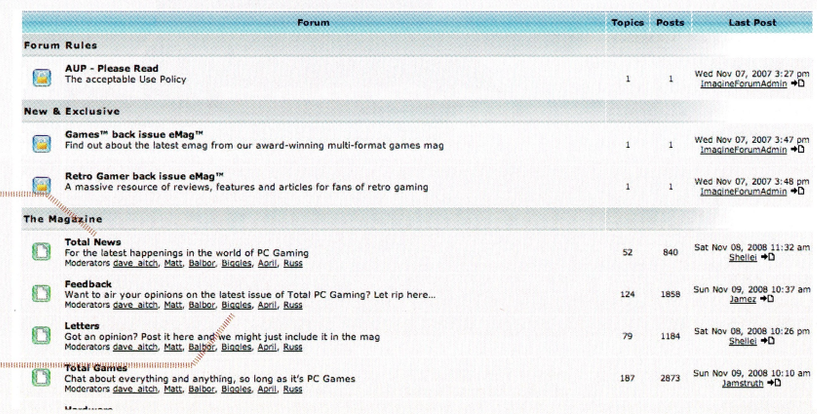

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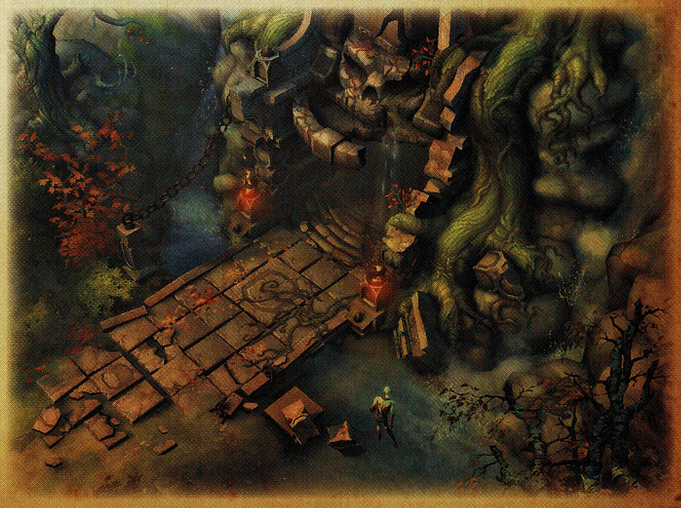
DIABLO
III

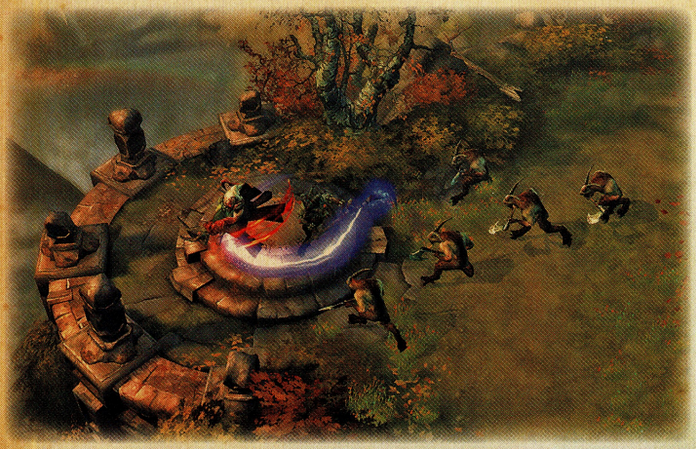
Fans of the lore can be assured that everything in this sequel happens for a reason...

More than a decade after the original Diablo's release, Blizzard intends on redefining the action RPG once again

***Diablo III* marks the long-awaited return to the decaying world of Sanctuary after an eight-year gap since the Lords of Destruction, Terror and Hatred were slain in *Diablo II*.** The wait is far from over, yet devoted fans and newcomers alike will be glad to learn that unlike most studios, Blizzard has actually been making the most of their painfully prolonged development time.

Although Blizzard is currently considering taking the franchise to consoles, it is first and foremost a PC game. To this end, the developer is stressing strictly mouse-driven gameplay that is intended to make *Diablo III* a more accessible experience. The keyboard can optionally be used to quickly access any of the menus or items in your inventory, but is not a necessity as the player can also utilise these tools with a simple click of the mouse. The most devastating omission from the control setup is the lack of WASD for movement. Admittedly, this method is not recurring in similar games found in the genre, but after playing *World Of Warcraft* and every other 3D PC game for hundreds of hours, the lack of an alternative control scheme is definitely felt. Instead, the left mouse button is used for both movement (holding it down will 'steer' your character





Diablo III is an excellent blend of fantasy horror and action RPGs

Diablo is hardly unique, but its execution is what sets the experience above all the others

continuously) and combat: standard attacks or any of your skills can be assigned to either mouse button, and can also be held down for continuous use, as long as your mana bank has not been depleted.

When starting a new game, players will have the choice of five different classes, each with a male and female counterpart. Unfortunately, there is no customisation as far as their individual physical traits are concerned. Lead designer Jay Wilson, who has previously worked on *Warhammer: Dawn Of War*, said they toyed with the option, but ultimately decided that because the on-screen characters are relatively small in play, things like hair style, skin and eye colour would go mostly unnoticed, especially after layers of armour and equipment have begun to pile on as early as the first minutes of game time.

BlizzCon 2008 was not only the first time the game was playable, but also marked the unveiling of the Wizard class, who was even given her own cinematic in-game trailer (the male Wizard only appeared in the class selection screen as a barely visible apparition). In contrast to the other two previously revealed classes, the female Wizard is a young, attractive and cocky spellcaster who walks into dangerous dungeons with the confidence of a supermodel on a runway, and can obliterate roomfulls of enemies in the blink of an eye. The Wizard comes equipped with the flashiest arsenal of magic yet, focusing on trickery and raw destructive power in a manner quite similar to the Sorcerer and Sorceress from previous games. Several live demonstrations and in-depth panels by Blizzard developers stressed the personality of the Wizard, leading into how the in-game NPCs will react differently to each class. Depending on who you choose, you may either be met with adoration and respect or disdain and disgust. This represents just one of the many ways *Diablo III* will offer a unique experience each and every playthrough.

The Wizard is certainly the most immediately powerful and visually flamboyant class, yet the Witch Doctor has the most intriguing cache of skills. This is due to the game's new feature of allowing certain abilities to be combined, amplifying them with special effects. For instance, summoning zombie dogs to your side and then setting them on fire will not hurt your pets, but rather give them the high probability of setting any foe they come in to contact with aflame. Plus, having a small army of burning hell hounds following you around just looks really damn cool (especially when your party members keep thinking they are being attacked by them). There are plenty of other possibilities, and Blizzard is currently working out the details of how two classes will be able to interact with each other to create even more unique skills. It must be noted that the Witch Doctor is not an attractive class, and it was for this reason specifically that we queried

Evolution of Dungeon Diving

Eye Of The Beholder Sanctuary borrows heavily from the dungeon-crawling games that came before, and *Diablo III* even includes skills lifted directly from the D&D universe.

Diablo The first *Diablo* ushered in a new generation of point-and-click action RPGs that continue to this day.

Diablo II Luckily the copycats have died down a bit since *Diablo* and *Diablo II*, but *Diablo III* may reignite the genre.

Dungeon Siege *Diablo III*'s new visual direction and forest environments are ironically reminiscent on Chris Taylor's famed Diablo-inspired franchise.

about the physical customisation. It is all tied in with the lore, however, and so it would not make much sense to have a six-foot-tall blonde Amazon running around casting voodoo spells with a Haitian accent, but still... most players are going to want to give the female Witch Doctor a helmet real fast.

The Barbarian is the only returning class to be playable in *Diablo III*, although many other familiar faces will make an appearance as NPCs throughout your adventure or as additions to the roster in the inevitable expansion pack. Blizzard explicitly stated that they only brought the Barbarian back as a result of being the one class they felt they could improve. However, in comparison to the other two magic-heavy classes, the Barbarian is not especially impressive or fun to play as. The level cap prevented the use of most of the Barbarians more powerful skills, several of which return from the last game, but initial impressions point to magic being the way to go in *Diablo III*. The last two classes have yet to be revealed, although the fan-favourite Necromancer was specifically mentioned as not making a return, since Blizzard believed it to be 'already perfected'. Given that the existing three

SPEC-ULA-TION

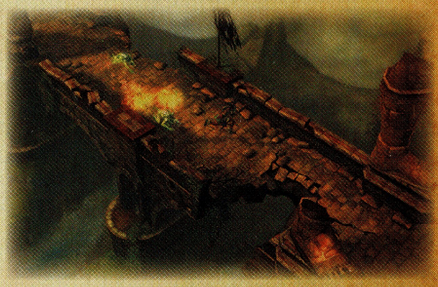
What will it take to run this game? Here's our best guess

CPU: Pentium 4 2.4GHz

RAM: 1GB

GRAPHICS: ATI Radeon 9800 or equivalent

Diablo III has been designed - like all other Blizzard games - to work on as many computers as possible. Blizzard is still contemplating whether or not to implement visual effects exclusive to DirectX 10 for StarCraft II, but anyone with a midrange setup should be able to get the most out of Diablo III.



Frost Nova is useful when surrounded by large groups of enemies

Each enemy has its own weaknesses and resistances, although anyone who has played an RPG before can likely guess what they are

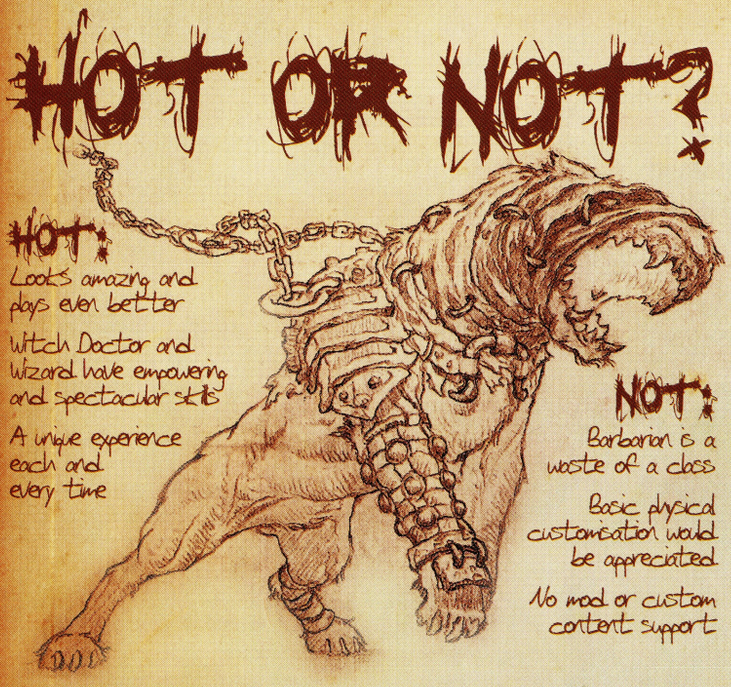
Summoning zombie dogs to your side and then setting them on fire will not hurt your pets

classes focus on offensive tactics and abilities, some sort of support or healer class is guaranteed.

Like *World Of Warcraft*, each class has a skill tree consisting of three distinct disciplines: The Wizard can choose from Storm, Arcane and Conjuring; the Witch Doctor has Plague, Spirit and Voodoo, and the Barbarian has Berserker, Juggernaut and Battlemaster. A balance of key skills from each discipline seems more interesting than mastering a single path, but once the entire skill trees are added, this method may become imprudent. Skill Runes, a new feature in *Diablo III*, can be added to most skills in order to augment their usefulness, unlike the runes in *Diablo II*, which were only used in socketed items. As an example, one rune allowed the Wizard to increase the number of Mirror Images she could summon, or, if used on her Spectral Blade skill instead, increase the range of the attack. There will also be many different types of Skill Runes with varying effects, enabling you to extensively customise your skills and add a layer of depth to the gameplay.

Levelling up works as you would expect it, although the massive explosion of white light that erupts from your character upon procuring the required amount of experience points is quite startling the first time, especially when in the midst of a battle in a creepy, unexplored dungeon. Your stats will increase and you will be given a set number of skill points to unlock new abilities or power up old ones. The inventory is also reminiscent of

HOT OR NOT?*



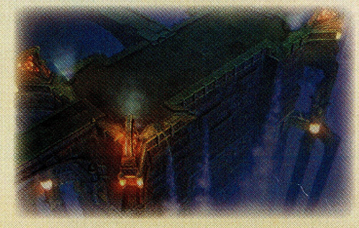
past *Diablo* games, except that new bag items allow you to expand your carrying capacity – which is great, because there is much loot to be had and trips back and forth from town are never fun when you're knee-deep in an exciting quest. In fact, when joined by other players, treasure chests and enemies will drop player-specific loot – the loot you see will be exclusive to you, and likewise for your friends. This eliminates fighting over rare drops, but once an item has been picked up, it can then be traded or dropped again, enabling anyone to take it.

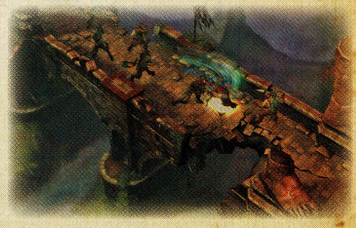
In keeping with the tradition of randomly generated dungeons, *Diablo III* takes things several steps further by introducing random quests and encounters. Essentially, these mean you could play through the game as each class and still never see every single unique quest or enemy the game has to offer. The quests themselves are much more cinematic, often involving scripted events such as a soldier being dragged into a hole just as you're about to save him, and seconds later being puréed into a fountain of blood and guts. This extends to boss battles as well, which feel far more intense and relevant as a result. The adventure as a whole just feels extremely epic from moment to moment, an effect that Blizzard stated was its direct objective.

The fixed isometric camera angle and randomly generated dungeons can occasionally create some minor anomalies, such as blind spots where the character cannot be seen by the player. When entering rooms or structures, the majority of the time the walls will turn transparent, but there are some smaller obstacles that do not. Jay Wilson said this was something they had not fully found a solution to, and pointed out that *Diablo II* suffered from a similar affliction. The fixed camera is also a restriction that most modern gamers will not feel comfortable with at first, but it allows Blizzard to construct a game that always looks great while not requiring as much processing power, so the sacrifice has its redeeming points.

The new destructible environments help make the player feel more powerful, but for the most part the destruction is quite limited; there are plenty of objects like bookcases and doors that will be completely undamaged no matter how many magic meteors you rain down on them. Many recent games like *Alone In The Dark* and *Far Cry 2* have begun pushing the ability to set the environments on fire, but that is not something Blizzard has plans to implement, despite the countless drapes and carpets just begging to be burnt down. Much drama has been hurled at the game's new, more colourful visual direction, yet the dungeon in the current build was extremely reminiscent of the dark, horror-inspired locales that *Diablo* is known for. The jump from pixels to polygons brings the franchise up to date in a significant and formidable manner.

Diablo III has the ability to support up to eight players, but Blizzard suggests four players at once is the optimal setup, and may even restrict game





Boss battles are far more cinematic this time around, and each has their own story leading up the showdown

Diablo III

The dungeon in the current build was extremely reminiscent of the dark, horror inspired locales that Diablo is known for

servers to that number. Cheaters and hacks have plagued the *Diablo* games since their inception, but Jay Wilson feels confident that the years of managing *Diablo II*, *Warcraft III* and *World Of Warcraft* now make Blizzard a very capable company when it comes to making Battle.net the most secure and efficient online service.

Rob Pardo, Blizzard's executive vice president of game design, revealed that all Blizzard games going forward would include an achievement system similar to the one seen in *Wrath Of The Lich King*. Jay Wilson confirmed this fact, but made it clear that the achievements will not be designed to force the player to do things that feel unnatural, such as trying to survive for extended periods of time without healing themselves. Either way, at least some of the games achievements will undoubtedly be tied in to the new combo system: whenever an enemy is killed, an invisible timer begins. As long as the player continuously links together kills without the timer running out, they will build up their combo bonus. In its current state, the bonuses are small amounts of additional XP depending on how many enemies were defeated, but the system is still being heavily refined. It would be interesting if elements of the bonus chains from *Final Fantasy XII* were brought over, granting players status boosts and more valuable item drops based on their combat performance.

Perhaps the biggest blow to the PC community is the announcement that there will not be any mod support or user-created content in *Diablo III*. It's something Blizzard would liked to have included, but predicted it would add another year and a half to its already lengthy development time. The years of development do have an upside for devout followers of *Diablo*'s story, as Blizzard has put a colossal amount of time into building up the game's lore, and have even connected *Diablo III* with the many novels that have been written during the gap since the second game. Even how a third *Diablo* game can exist at all after the titular villain was definitively destroyed in *Diablo II* will be answered, but unfortunately that's a story that gamers will be waiting for a while to play. It must be said that if this is what Blizzard has already created, then the final product will be nothing short of a masterpiece.

William J. Haley

COMPLETE-O-METER

Although Diablo III is playable and surprisingly better than most of the games already released by other companies, Blizzard has stated that it won't be ready for a while.

70%

PREVIEW
COLIN MCRAE: DIRT 2

"Suddenly the man behind the Colin McRae name, who had consulted on the series for a decade, was gone"

Spec-ulation

What will it take to run this game? Here's our best guess:

- **CPU:** 2.6GHz dual-core
- **RAM:** 2GB
- **GRAPHICS:** GeForce 8800

Based on the recommended specifications for the original game and factoring in the newer EGO engine, *DiRT 2*'s mid-range should look a little like what we've detailed above.

Mud is your main problem in the Malaysian Rawang Rally Run

A dog's home, a power station, and now Battersea has *DiRT 2* to its name

Release date 2009

COLIN MCRAE: DIRT 2

DiRT 2 heads off-road without its original series navigator

Info
GENRE Rally simulation
DEVELOPER Codemasters Studios
PUBLISHER Codemasters
WEB www.colinmcrae.com

It was a surreal day in September 2007 when we heard the news that Colin McRae and his son had tragically died in a helicopter accident. One minute we were eagerly anticipating the release of *Colin McRae: DiRT*, then suddenly the man behind the *Colin McRae* name, who had consulted on the series for a decade, was gone. His legacy to the games industry is impressive, and the decision to continue the *Colin McRae* series has been made jointly between his family and Codemasters.

Colin McRae: DiRT 2 sports the third generation of the famous EGO Engine, with car handling, physics and damage modelling all upgraded. There's twice as much detail on cars and tracks as a result of the ramped-up visual fidelity, which is hard to imagine considering the sharp detail in the original *DiRT*. The second episode in the *DiRT* series features a diverse selection of officially licensed rally and off-road vehicles in seven classes, including the Group N Subaru, the heavyweight from the original.

New events include Utah canyon racing in Creek Trailblazer, the muddy Malaysian rainforest race in Rawang Rally Run and the Battersea Battle, an urban race set around the iconic disused power station. Codemasters has been working on these events to open up a fresh range of race styles, including the standard Rally across hazardous locations, Rallycross, a downhill frenzy in Trailblazer, a rejigged Rally Raid from *DiRT* has become Raid in *DiRT 2*, with an obstacle course of open point-to-point stages for up to eight players in heavy off-road vehicles.

DiRT 2 has also taken an interesting angle on career progression, with the player starting their World Tour in a rather derelict-looking RV whose interior forms the front end to the game and the way to new locations. You'll be able to view each location through the windows of the RV, and as you work your way through the ranks, the trappings of your success will become apparent: your home will upgrade and trophies will appear on display.

"Colin McRae was all about the speed, the excitement and the entertainment of rally driving," said Gavin Raeburn, senior executive producer at Codemasters, "he captured a freedom and a spirit that enthralled rally fans. He could do things with a car that no one else would, and that's where we're taking the series with new events at the extreme edge of rally and autosport. *Colin McRae: DiRT 2* will be a great tribute to an incredible champion."

Ben Biggs

- Highly detailed visuals, courtesy of the new engine
- Realistic physics and a new damage engine
- The series has a tradition of critical acclamation

Hot or not?

- High PC specifications probably required, especially online
- Not casual and not for the faint-hearted. Not a bad thing?
- The first game in the series without McRae onboard

Complete-o-meter 50%
Just how finished is this game?

This is the first official announcement, and although Codemasters has been working on *DiRT 2* just prior to the release of *DiRT*, there's masses to be done yet.

Creek Trailblazer is set in Utah and features a treacherous canyon run

Game DNA What makes up the game?

- Colin McRae: DiRT
- Colin McRae Rally
- Colin McRae Rally 3
- Colin McRae Rally 2005

PREVIEW
FUEL

Between the chequered flags there's an enormous world to traverse

Release date **December 2009**

FUEL

Petrol crisis killing your dreams of driving? Here's Fuel for your appetite

More off-road than a Scottish national park

Info

GENRE Open-world racer
DEVELOPER Asobo Studios
PUBLISHER Codemasters
WEB www.codemasters.co.uk

The open-world concept is spreading. Ever since Bethesda Softworks showed how commercial a massive and free-roaming expanse could be for RPGs, other developers have been coming around to the idea that this could work for other genres, too. First-person shooters, hybrid FPS/RPGs and now even racing games. We spoke to David Brickley, executive producer at Asobo Studio, who told us about its upcoming open-world racer with a very trendy *Mad Max 2*-style theme: "*Fuel* is set in an alternate present, where accelerated global warming and the extreme weather it brings has ravaged this re-imagined America. Most people have fled to safe areas, abandoning the interior, but a new breed of racers have turned this now-unpopulated environment into a playground for extreme races.

"The game world is the largest ever created for a racing game. It contains really interesting and different areas from America and has really dramatic weather effects. Players can race in Career mode, explore the environment in Freeroam, or design their own tracks and share them online. It's a huge racing sandbox, with hundreds of different challenges."

Asobo's mantra for *Fuel* is 'If you can see it, you can drive to it' – a bold claim that raises a lot technical questions, "Creating the world's largest ever racing environment certainly provides plenty of challenges. The main challenge, of course, is to allow players to reach those places they'd expect to given the vehicle line-up. There's no point in having this huge environment if you can't really explore and enjoy it, so we've worked really hard on terrain formation, the vehicle capabilities and route and track design so that players will be able to go more or less everywhere they want to in the game."

Naturally, David drew parallels with contemporary open-world games from other genres, and painted a very attractive picture of *Fuel* in the process: "In a way, many of the 'big' challenges are shared with open-world shooters and RPGs. In these large-scale games, it's all about creating a world that's inviting, compelling, consistent and has a sense of discovery. By using satellite data from carefully selected areas of the American wilderness, we are able to offer an environment that contains huge diversity, not just endless, generic yellow desert. Everything from snow-capped mountains like Mount Rainer, to the forests of Yosemite National Park, badlands and everything in between are open to race and explore.

"Then we have hubs that are the remains of destroyed cities, and they are home to stunt parks and more races and act as a base to explore the world. It all allows our designers to offer a huge range of different challenges, from short-circuit sprints to hour-long Baja-style races. And then there's the route editor, which lets players create their own race and compete online. Apply a day/night cycle, extreme weather effects and 16 classes of vehicles, we think that we're offering a huge amount of content and diversity, as well as the opportunity for players to explore and make their own fun in this huge racing sandbox."

Ben Biggs

Spec-ulation

What will it take to run this game? Here's our best guess

- **CPU:** 2.6GHz dual-core
- **RAM:** 2GB
- **GRAPHICS:** 512MB GeForce 8800GT

Judging by the standard specification of other open-world games, the above is a fair bet for a recommended setup for *Fuel*. But it is multiformat, so a lesser machine won't be stung.

Complete-o-meter 55%
Just how finished is this game?

It's early pre-alpha days on *Fuel*, and December 2009 is a very ballpark deadline. Don't be surprised if this date changes significantly.

HAVE YOUR SAY about *Fuel* on our forum at www.totalpcgaming.com/forum

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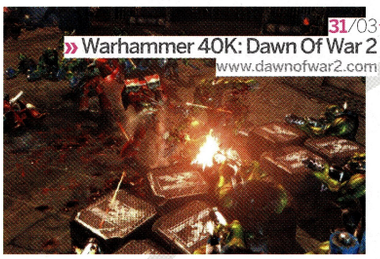
Gaze into the future of PC games – no crystal ball required



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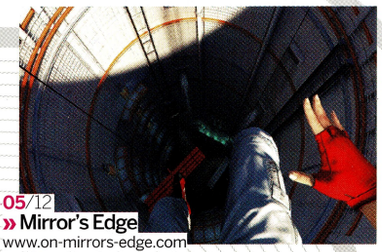

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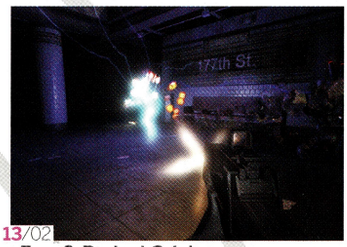

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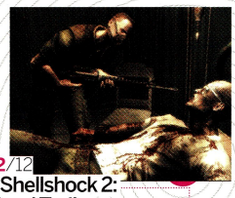

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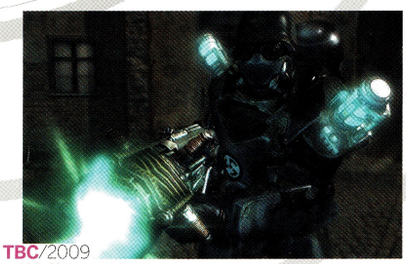

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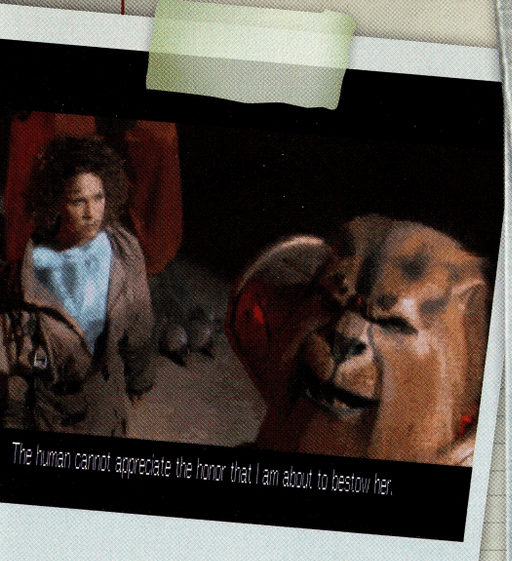
LIFE IN THE PALM OF YOUR HAND

THE INTERACTIVE AND IMMERSIVE NATURE OF GAMING OFFERS UNPARALLELED POTENTIAL FOR STORYTELLERS TO COMMUNICATE WITH THEIR AUDIENCE. HOW LONG WILL IT BE BEFORE WE START TALKING?

For any fan of games and stories, it is both puzzling and sad to hear one of gaming's most loved characters, Al Lowe (creator of the *Leisure Suit Larry* series and wearer of one of the broadest, most beaming smiles on the planet), proclaim with a sigh, "I've seen the storylines in games go down over the last ten years to a point where it's almost not there." It is hard to deny the argument. Save for some precious exceptions, stories in games these days are just regurgitated stereotypes that give a backdrop to gameplay. The vast majority of the industry seems to agree that writing has a major part to play in gaming. As David Kozlowski, a lead designer noted for work on *America's Army*, states, "Any design that is putting an emphasis on story and environment with gameplay in service to that will benefit the game." Even beyond this insular industry, looking back at man's history, it seems genealogically evident that games ought to be conveying stories. "For tens of thousands of years, people have sat around campfires and told stories," Lowe explains. Storytelling is mankind's most important and original art form. Over our evolution we have created music, films, books and paintings, all of which have told some kind of story; all of which have tried to express the state of their creator. Over 20 years ago, Lowe lectured, "This is just a new medium, a means to do that in a better way." Yet we sit here still in the bowels of narrative starvation, despite having both the resources and will to turn the situation around. Why?

Since the very birth of the gaming industry, writing has been fighting for a prevalent position in game design. In the early days, having immediate interactivity and narrative running side-by-side seemed impossible. Gameplay was limited to titles such as *Pong* and *Spacewar!*, which, though fun, couldn't achieve a high sense of immersion due to the lack of context, while story was limited to the text-based genre that was more akin to interactive novellas than what is considered gaming today. The most obvious reason for this is technology: there simply wasn't the processing power for graphics to be

GOOD WRITING = PROFIT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"LUCASARTS IS ONE COMPANY THAT UNDERSTANDS THE IMPORTANCE OF WRITING"

SINCE THE VERY BIRTH OF THE GAMING INDUSTRY, WRITING HAS BEEN FIGHTING FOR A PREVALENT POSITION IN GAME DESIGN

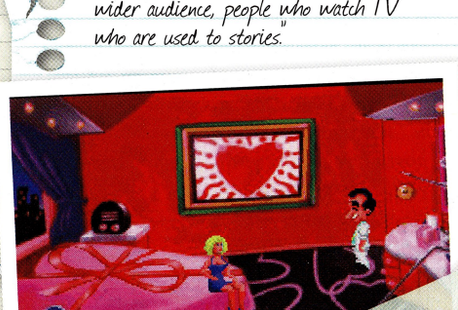
used to convey story. Yet there is a more important reason: no media is ever born with a fan base already in place. The gaming industry is no different. In order to garner popularity, games had to work off of the already established markets of its siblings: movies, books, sports and board games. So it was games like Marc Blank's *Zork* that took the narrative of a novel or movie and added interactivity, while *Tennis For Two* and its offspring relied on sports and board games.

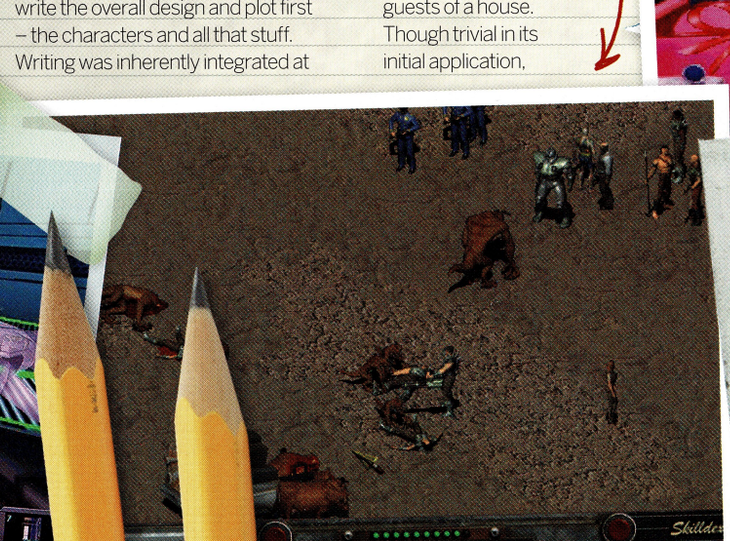
These two branches of the gaming industry would continue to develop in their own regard, while waiting for technology to progress to a point where they could be brought together. Titles such as Will Crowther's *The Colossal Cave* (1977), which takes the form of an exploration of a cave in Kentucky – albeit it with monsters and sorcery – developed and inspired the writing side of gaming, while *Space Invaders*, *Asteroids* and *Pac-Man* focused on user interaction.

A quarter of a century after the industry's birth, and storytelling and graphics were finally ready to be united. In 1980, On-Line Systems (now remembered as Sierra Entertainment) began using vector graphics to illustrate their text-based gameplay with the adventure title *Mystery House*. Lowe, who worked at Sierra for over 25 years, reminisces, "We always thought that story was important. We tended to write the overall design and plot first – the characters and all that stuff. Writing was inherently integrated at that time, as I was writer, programmer and director. I would write the dialogues and descriptions as we went along." This, of course, was a different generation to today, with different visions of what games should be. "We approached it at the point of storytellers," says Lowe. That said, *Mystery House* was far from Booker Prize-worthy. The narrative simply took the form of a detective story, where the player is set the objective of discovering who is murdering the guests of a house. Though trivial in its initial application,

It goes without saying. All this talk of needing better writing in games will go nowhere unless there is proof that it increases sales. Slowly, this proof seems to be coming. "I think games like GTA sell because of the history, but also because there is a strong, compelling character and story," says David Kozlowski. "Without the strong stories or characters I don't think they would have longevity. Games without good writing trail off very fast. Many people are interested in seeing what the game's about and want to get into the story."

As always, in an industry based on cloning, it takes a few exemplary and explorative publishers and developers to start the ball rolling. Kozlowski assures that this too is beginning to happen. "LucasArts, for example, is one company that really understands [the importance of writing]. It's virtually their company philosophy, and it's most evident in Force Unleashed. Their previous games didn't sell well, but that game is specific to the canon and sold well because of it; so it's evidence to that point." Not only does good writing aid sales in the already established market, it is key to broadening that demographic. Kozloski explains, "Maybe the hardcore gamer doesn't care about story, but we're trying to reach the wider audience, people who watch TV who are used to stories."





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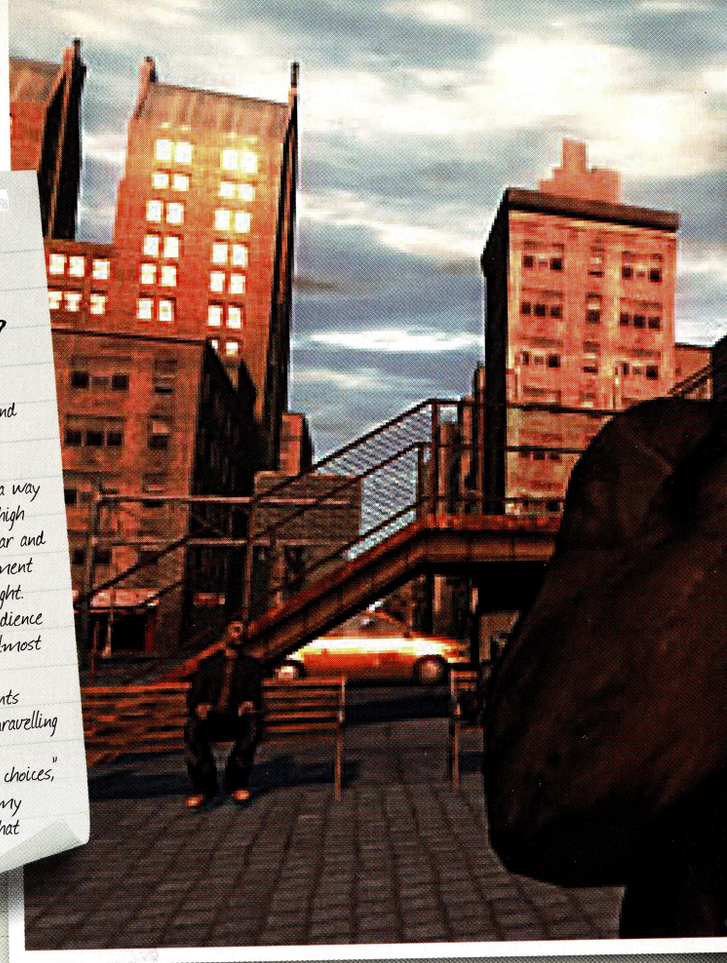


Why is writing in games so precious?

Part of the reason why writing has consistently struggled to find its feet in games, is simply the pure scale of what it has to offer. Unlike movies and books, games are open worlds. It is considerably harder for a games designer to order a story in a way that brings players along on the journey while maintaining a high level of playability, than it is for those involved in more linear and direct medias. Interactivity offers a higher depth of involvement than any other media, and, as such, requires more forethought. Game writers do not have the liberation of telling their audience how a story should be told, but rather have to direct us, almost paternally, on our own journey of discovery.

To not just be witnessing the amazing, life-changing events that characters go through, but to be in control of their unravelling stories, that is the potential of gaming. "The hallmark of interactive games is the ability to give players meaningful choices," says Sande Chen. "I want not only meaningful choices in my games, but also meaningful experiences. I want a game that feels satisfying to me, as a game player and as a story lover."

INDIE GAMES

As with many writers, Sande Chen broke into the industry working on indie projects, for which gaming has much to be thankful for. Free from the need to guarantee a profit, and with a smaller team in which the initial narrative vision can be nurtured rather than swamped, the indie market has proven the poignancy of writing in games. Titles such as Chen's The Witcher have proven how effective good writing can be in drawing players into games with more emotional attachment. Chen recounts, "What I liked about The Witcher is that players did think about and, in some cases, agonized over their choices." Hopefully, this ideal of meaningful interaction will break through to the mainstream market and our thumb-blistering gameplay will come to reward us with truly touching moments of art. It's one thing trying to stay alive until the end of a game simply for completion, and quite another to want to protect a character we have been made, through evocative writing, to truly care for.

having brought graphics and text together, Sierra had driven gaming to a point where it was finally ready to give its precious gift of interactivity to mankind's oldest art form.

Sadly, the industry didn't listen. Instead of moving towards storytelling, the general consensus was that games should be improved by their gameplay. So it was that games began to get more and more defined by their genres. Sega's *Heavyweight Champ*, the first beat-'em-up, became *Kung Fu Master* and then *Renegade*, *Spacewar!* became *Space Invaders* and then *R-Type*, and, of course, Mario went from jumping up ladders to down pipes. What do all these titles have in common? Their narratives couldn't challenge a toddler. That isn't to say there weren't any exceptions.

Among the confusion of jumping, shooting and punching, certain precious developers sought that diadem of artistry. Tim Schafer introduced us to pirate life in the legendary *The Secret Of Monkey Island*, the dystopian society of Warren Spector's *Deus Ex* burst open the gates of non-linearity, and the *Wing Commander* series used greenscreen filming to give live-action to its stories.

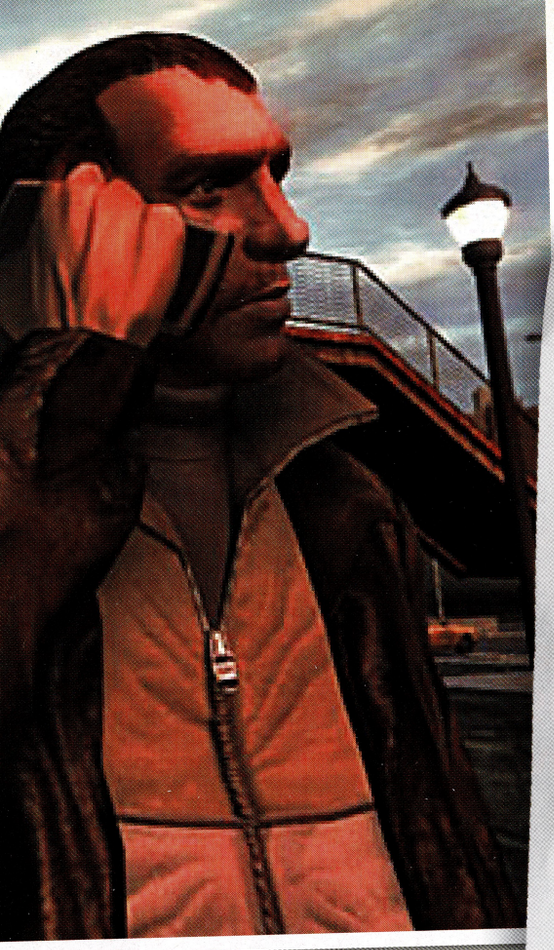
Certain games also looked outside their own development team to get the best writers available. "We hired actual film screenwriters," says Chris Roberts, creator of the *Wing Commander* series. "*Wing Commander III* and *IV* were based on story ideas I had that the writers turned into very good and dense scripts!" Yet, despite this proof that games could have brilliant stories and the reassurance that the sales of said games ensured, the developers still closed their doors. "Years ago, at EA, I heard that, if someone sends in something unsolicited, we won't open it, because the company could end up being sued," David Kozlowski remembers, while Al Lowe sadly notes, "Developers create games by looking at sales of other products and trying to create a game similar but better to get similar sales. The whole process of 'we can't do anything that's not been done before' is a road to death."

BIOSHOCK IS GOING TO BECOME THE NORM, WHERE GAME DESIGN ISN'T JUST BASED ON GAMEPLAY, BUT ALSO STORY

In order for gaming to truly find its way out of the authorial slums, the publishers and developers will need to open their gates to those talented writers banging on them. "Everyone in the industry is trying to get a piece of the creative pie, and that comes down to the writing, so there's pressure on the outside as the insiders themselves are struggling to get the opportunity," says Kozlowski. Gaming has to realise its potential as a storytelling media if it is avoid the stale fate that Al Lowe fears, "Gamers will be robbed of one of the [precious] things games can offer."

Thankfully, over the last few years, writing in games has started to gain the respect and attention it deserves. Writers like Sande Chen (*The Witcher*) have begun to research just exactly what games have to offer storytelling (and vice-versa), while providing gamers with enthralling stories that give meaning to our interaction. In return, the industry has begun to set up committees and awards to commend and encourage better writing. "I'm on the Steering Committee for the Writers Special Interest Group of the International Game Developers Association. I'm also a member of the Writers Guild of America Videogame Writers Caucus," says Chen. "Both of these groups want to bring attention to the fact that there are professional writers working in the industry. Last year, my writing partner, Anne Toole, and I, were nominated for the first ever Writers Guild of America Award in Videogame Writing. This is all part of valuing the contributions of writers to the medium."

The increased respect and encouragement for writing so far seems to be paying off. The last couple of years have seen a



"PEOPLE ARE GOING TO GET BORED OF JUST SHOOTING AND KILLING"

resurgence of narrative and vision, with titles like *BioShock* and *Portal* leading the way. So, will the writing in games ever hit the lofty heights of Hollywood's finest or Dickensian mastery?

"I think people are going to get bored of just shooting and killing," says Al Lowe. "I have to believe that as I have a great optimism about humanity. If we're just doing the same thing over and over again then we're dying. I believe you will see a rebirth of storytelling, character development, plot line and intricacies that have been missing for the past ten years, and all these things will come in one [distinct voice] instead of the many different genres we have now.' "I think [story is] already a selling point," says Chen. "When you read about a game, inevitably you'll hear a bit about the story, and we've already seen with games like *Portal* that gamers do appreciate good writing." Kozlowski agrees. "*BioShock* is going to become the norm, where game design isn't just based on gameplay, but also story. Games can't just be about gameplay. Design has to be broken into two pieces, half the gameplay, and the other the cognitive plot and setting, which we simply don't see at the moment.'

A life in the palm of our hands. A virtual self we can nurture and that can ultimately teach us more about our true selves. This is the beautiful yet starved potential of our industry.

Paul Harrison

BEST OF THE BEST

Despite the fact that the majority of narrative in games wouldn't be fit for a comic designed for ten-year-olds, there have been several examples that wouldn't be brought to shame in the Bodleian library. Here are three of the best.

DEUS EX

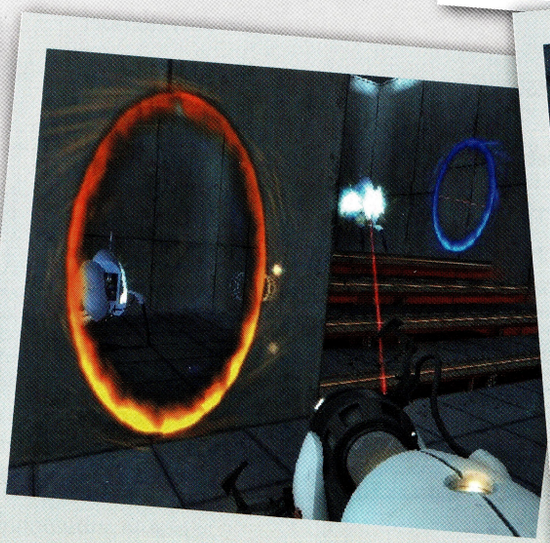
Coming from the mastermind that is Warren Spector, *Deus Ex* revolutionised both storytelling in games and gameplay with its character exploration and conspiracy-ridden dystopian future. Though many games have had better plotlines, few have bridged cutting-edge game mechanics with top quality storytelling so effectively.

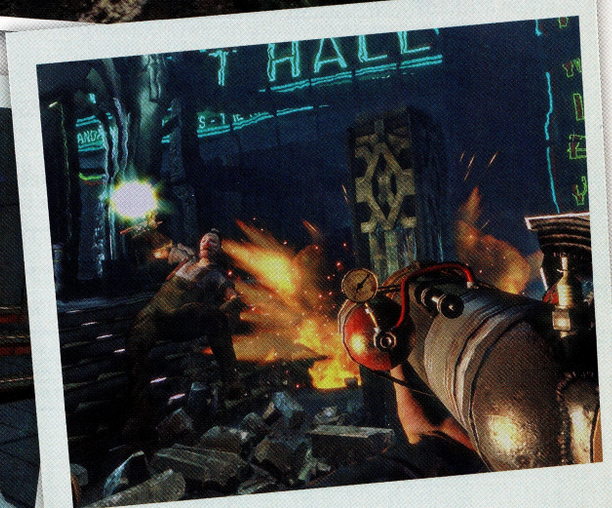
BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL

When a bunch of aliens abduct the orphans who have been living in her home, news reporter Jade is sent on a rescue mission that soon becomes one of the finest examples of story-benefiting gameplay to date. Without the touching relationships between the characters and the charming heroine, the gameplay would just be lost. With it, this is one of the most memorable games you will ever play.

SILENT HILL 2

Talk about a thrill ride. When *Silent Hill 2* opens, the protagonist, James Sunderland, receives a letter from his wife, who just happens to have been dead for three years. He is then lured to Silent Hill, a small town where his wife, Mary, finally succumbed to illness. All is not well in Silent Hill. There's a sexed-up version of Mary called Maria, a child searching for her mother and a murderer. James finds clue after clue about his wife and why he was sent the letter, and each clue brings him closer to the horrifying truth he has been hiding from: he killed his own wife. *Silent Hill 2* is a blindingly sinister example of all things creepy and crawly in gaming.





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REVIEWS

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It's in Treyarch's hands once again: can *World At War* make up for the disappointment that was *Call Of Duty 3*?

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It's back, it's 3D and even bigger than *Oblivion*!

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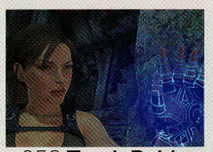

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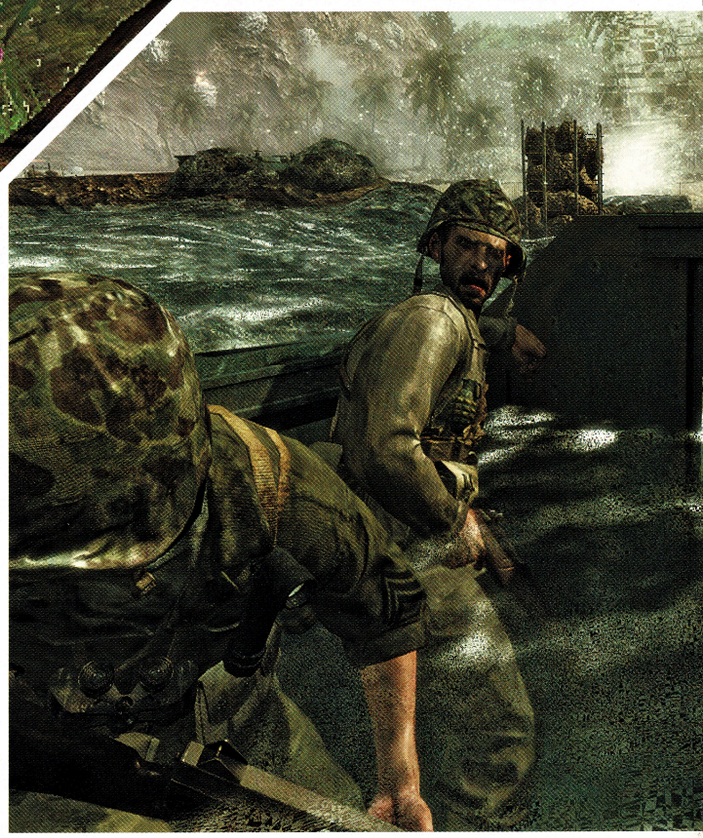


HOW WE REVIEW

APART FROM PLAYING THEM OF COURSE...

» Five out of ten is a mundane stroll through an ordinary park, ten is a ride like none you've ever known, while zero is the wasted piece of life you wish you had back. We also benchmark and take max/min detail comparison screens, which provides all the information you'll need when considering a purchase based on our reviews.

In three words **Visceral. Violent. Chaotic.**

CALL OF DUTY: WORLD AT WAR

Realism finds a new level

Details **PRICE** £34.99 | **BEST PRICE** £29.99 (Play.com) | **GENRE** WWII FPS
DEVELOPER Treyarch | **PUBLISHER** Activision | **WEB** www.callofduty.com/worldatwar

Whether or not *Call Of Duty: World At War* has overstepped the mark in its level of violence is all a matter of perspective. For years, games based around World War II have largely eschewed the realistic grotesquery of real war in favour of a sterile reproduction. Shooting a Nazi has always been greeted with little more than some floppy ragdoll physics, some German swearing and a polite sanguine eruption. Scenes in which you were captured were depicted as light-hearted affairs in which gruff German-accented SS commanders strolled around in front of you, camply monologuing on the virtues of giving up information. And lines of soldiers would be so well-behaved as to pop up and down out of cover indefinitely until you get round to shooting them in the face.

Right from the outset, *World At War* wants you to know that it is an entirely different breed of World War II experience. The opening scene depicts your interrogation by a group of Japanese soldiers. You'll be made to watch as your friend's throat is brutally cut, dashing claret into every corner of the tent. You'll gaze, equally shocked as said interrogator's innards go the same way as your buddy's jugular a split second before you're about to receive the same treatment. *World At War* does a fine job of forcing you to feel exactly how you should about such situations. You don't want to watch. You want to be untied from the chair. You want to get out. And cannily enough, this is precisely how you'd feel if you were really there. War movies provide a great allegory, because over many years we've witnessed a similar evolution. As the decades rolled by, the gung-ho adventures of *The Dirty Dozen* gave way the likes of *Apocalypse Now* and, more recently, *Saving Private Ryan*. These films had a message: war is filthy, random, brutal death. The Nazis aren't comical, leather-clad nancy-boys. Your enemy is not faceless. To kill is to feel.

It's not a direction we can see all war games taking, or indeed succeeding in as well as *World At War* has. But through the simple act of carefully researching the tactical aspects of the game, the brutality of its players and what happens to the average leg when hit at close range by a shot from a Browning automatic rifle, it forces you to feel different about your normally casual slaughter. Treyarch has actually been pretty dumb to be this clever. Other games, such as the recent *Brothers In Arms: Hell's Highway*, spend their not inconsiderable budgets on far too many 'when we get home, I'd like to buy you a beer' cut-scenes. The hope being that somewhere along the line you'll actually begin to care about them, at which point, they'll be detonated, along with the obligatory 'Noooooooo!'. Instead, Treyarch has simply attempted to reproduce war as best it can, carefully including all of the elements it could garner from the history books, as well as personal accounts. The upshot is that by mashing together each individual element from their checklist, the developer has entirely succeeded in creating human drama without needing to force it upon you. You'll care about what happens to your buddies – you'll care that they live – but you won't at any point be forced to watch as one or all of them exchange extraneous information about their wives and kids in a way that says 'just paint a target on my head and we'll get this over with'.

Videogames, as a rule, can't be held responsible for the way in which people enjoy them. There is nothing irresponsible about the violence of *World At War*, but we'd stop short of calling it 'fun'. The word implies, in its most obvious connotation, a magic rainbow-land with pink elephants and talking gophers. More than anything, it's a sign that videogames are coming of age. Rather than, as some may take it, another in a line of violent experiences that just goes to show (we're bashing a copy of the *Daily Mail* rhythmically on the table

First impressions last A gameplay snapshot

We've already winced at the violence upwards of eight times in this first half-hour.

The game's similarity to *COD 4* is becoming overwhelming. That's no bad thing, mind.

Cruising across the landscape in a near-indestructible tank is a hell of a lot of fun.

Still entertaining stuff. Number of times blown up by grenade may have just hit 1,000.

REVIEW
CALL OF DUTY: WORLD AT WAR

Second opinion

» We weren't really expecting much from *WAW*, but Treyarch has delivered a solid, if shocking, shooter. They get a bad rap – maybe we should lighten up on them a bit after this...

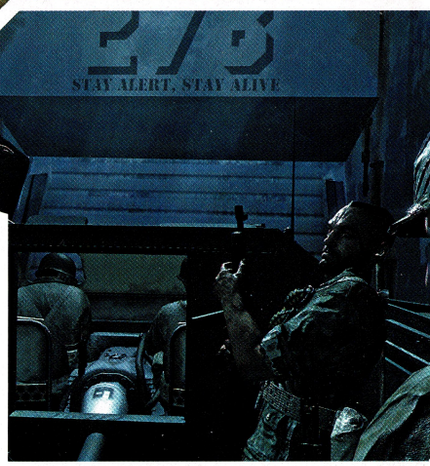
Russell Barnes

Being brutally beaten is par for the course in *World At War*

Fighting is loud, violent and chaotic. Men scream, explosions deafen and severed limbs fly in every direction. Blood, sweat and mud are incinerated at your whim.

Upside/downside

Grenades. Where in *COD 4*, these were relatively easy to either run from, or lob back at your enemies, in *World At War* they become a major irritation. We were killed by them hundreds of times.



Lighten up, hippies. Tanks are cool

» as we say this) that videogames are going too far, and is this really the sort of thing we should be allowing our children to play? The feeling among non-gamers being that we can't tell the difference between our actions on-screen and real murder. That, because we're taking pleasure from playing the game, that may carry over into real life, because our feeble minds are incapable of telling the difference. This is, of course, nonsense; just because we enjoyed *Schindler's List*, it doesn't mean we would describe it as 'fun', just as we wouldn't use the term to describe *World At War*. The game provides a different kind of enjoyment – one with both historical and experiential resonance.

Infinity Ward's predecessor, the uber-successful *Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, as with previous outings from the developer, held the player's interest using the simple mechanism of variety. One running and gunning level never followed another, and two tank levels were never back-to-back. Each section saw you doing something completely different. As well as adopting *COD 4*'s brilliant engine, Treyarch, after their last attempt, the incompetent *COD 3*, appears to have learned this lesson. You'll take control of both an American and a Russian soldier alternately; the former attempting to take a small pacific island from the Japanese, the latter on a vengeance march to Berlin. Japanese fighters used some very clever tactics to stave off occupation by superior numbers. Ambushes involving playing dead, booby-trapping friendly corpses and using camouflaged fox-holes and trees as points of attack were all in the Japanese

"Just because we enjoyed Schindler's List, doesn't mean we would describe it as 'fun'"

guerrilla repertoire. It's easy to feel like it's you and your men who are the victims when you find yourself at the sharp end of these tactics. Later on, though, the tack changes as, armed with a flamethrower, you'll have the unenviable task of burning hundreds of enemies alive. The inclusion of stock footage between missions of this actually happening brings horror to the point of guilt, as each tap of the trigger is greeted by a screaming polygonal effigy.

In 1945, after the Russians had sustained losses of nearly 1.3 million troops in Hitler's push to take Moscow, the Germans found themselves too thinly spread and unable to maintain their front. The Russians, gathering what was left of their armies, drove the Germans all the way back to Berlin. With such great losses to Russian soldiers and civilians alike, their vengeance was brutal. Real-life accounts of their treatment of the enemy once they had them on the back foot and hoofing it back to Germany make shocking reading. Again, *World At War* grants you every opportunity to play a part, first in giving you a taste of what your enemy is capable of and then by unleashing your vengeful stampede.

But this is, after all, just a videogame, and as such, we feel that a little more recognition needs to have been given to its very nature. Because, even despite us falling short of describing *World At War* as 'fun', it still needs to remain entertaining. And occasionally, the game favours realism over satisfaction. Grenades, for example. Maybe in real-life warfare, they do pour down on you like rain. In all honesty, having never fought in any real wars, we couldn't really tell you, but that's exactly how it often seems in *World At War*. Many sections of the game are rendered completely free of any required skill in favour of chancing it through the hail of grenades and bullets, because taking cover will get you blown up. And unlike *COD 4*, where the grenade indicator gave you a reasonable amount of time to react, whether that be to leg it or lob it back, something has gone wrong in *World At War*. Locating the grenade in order to throw it back is almost impossible, as is getting out of range at full sprint when you see the grenade land. Worst of all, you'll often get shredded by one without so much as a blip from the warning indicator, and getting snagged on scenery or NPCs in your attempt to get clear is frighteningly common.

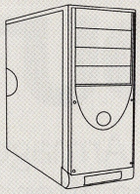
The game also suffers from that old *COD* stalwart: infinite enemies. Finite numbers are for wusses, so you'll have to get used to shooting enemies only in order that they're not shooting at you as you run to the next piece of cover, because moving forward is the only way to make progress. It doesn't matter if you've just pulled off 600 consecutive headshots, they'll keep coming until you stand on an invisible marker a couple of metres into no-man's-land. It occasionally makes sense when you're on the frontline and your enemies are pouring over a nearby hill, but not when they're ceaselessly spawning out of a seemingly Tardis-like bunker.

Furthermore, and we never thought we'd hear ourselves say this, but the game is simply too hard in places. Where other *COD* games make up for the enemy's superior numbers with superior cack-handedness when it comes to their aim, the AI of *World At War* are all, bar none, a crack shot. Often this means that if you stick your head up for even half a second, you'll have it shot off, which, in a game with no cover system per se, is simply unbearable. And that's providing you even have half a second before the half-dozen grenades go off at your feet. *World At War* is accomplished and flawed in equal measure. A good game. A brave game. But one that could do with some fine-tuning in the actual gameplay department.

Dan Howdle

With both the main cannon and a flamethrower onboard, owning a tank feels a bit like playing god

Tech specs



»requirements

CPU AMD 64 3200+ or Intel Pentium 4 3.0GHz or better
RAM 512MB (XP) 1GB (Vista)
GRAPHICS Shader 3.0 or better, 256MB Nvidia GeForce 6600GT or ATI Radeon 1600XT or better

We say

Considering the relatively unnoticeably dip in quality on Minimum settings, the recommended setup should do nicely. Good news for low-end PC gamers, but not so hot for those wanting to take advantage of their DX10 beasts.

Performance anxiety

How do the graphic settings affect the look of the game?

»maximum detail

Don't expect revolutionary visuals. Here you have a solid engine, but one primarily with consoles in mind

»minimum detail

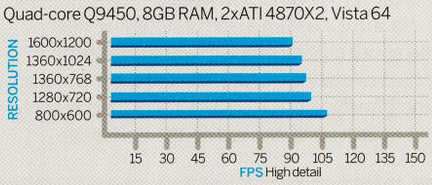
Some facial smoothness and depth of field effects are lost, along with a noticeable change in lighting and shadow detail

»Technical tip

The difference between maximum and minimum settings is of comparatively little note. You'll still have a good experience with everything set to minimum.

»fps vs resolution

Quad-core Q9450, 8GB RAM, 2xATI 4870X2, Vista 64



Verdict

Shocking, chaotic and uber-violent. For those who can take it, there's a fine game lurking despite the flaws.

8

In three words **Mutants. Vaults. VATS.**

FALLOUT 3

Proof that nuclear Armageddon wouldn't be such a bad thing after all

Details **PRICE** £34.99 | **BEST PRICE** £24.99 (Play.com) | **GENRE** Action RPG | **DEVELOPER** Bethesda Game Studios | **PUBLISHER** Bethesda Softworks | **WEB** fallout.bethsoft.com

There are, no doubt, quite a few downsides to nuclear war. It's eminently possible that *Neighbours* transmissions would be interrupted due to news updates or the entire cast being wiped out. Indeed, contracting radiation sickness every time you strayed too close to some standing water would also be tiresome, and freakish mutants' repeated attempts to bite your face off couldn't be too much fun, either. Frankly, though, the whole 'hunker down in a bunker for a while and ride it out' thing looks pretty enjoyable. It's against such a backdrop that *Fallout 3* plays out, though rather than fleeing to your shelter when things looked to be going tits up, you were born in it.

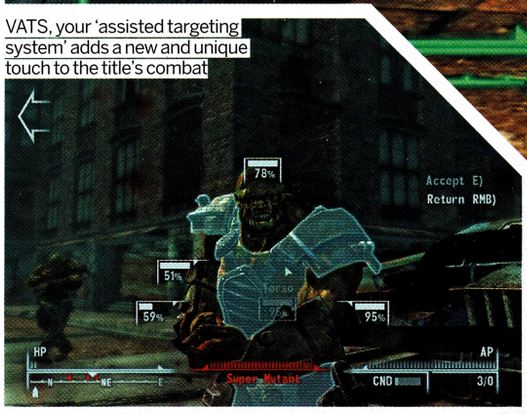
The fact that your experience will begin from this most definitive of beginnings means that, right off the bat, there's a strong sense of involvement in the world you'll be spending your time in. Rather than introducing you to your controls under the guise of something comparatively trivial (like an 'exosuit configuration'), you do it in the context of taking your first steps. From this point, you'll then experience various other rites of passage (tenth birthday, life-deciding exams and, err... first BB gun) safely within the confines of Vault 101 – a large, steel bunker embedded deep into a rocky hillside. You're all set up to live life as happily ever after as could be expected in the circumstances, complete with father, potential love interest, friends and bullies. Such bliss, however, never lasts, and so your father duly leaves without so much as a note to explain his actions. When there's a nuclear wasteland full of radioactive unpleasantness outside, opening the vault's door and popping out doesn't go down particularly well, and you're forced to follow in your father's footsteps.

Having gone from a land of close-knit safety where your biggest problem was the resident alpha-male, to the mutant-infested expanses of a ruined Washington DC, is a moment that certainly doesn't lack significance. Though it's lovingly made you familiar with life in general, allowed you choose your specialist skills and taught you the basics of combat in what was essentially a cleverly constructed tutorial sequence, *Fallout 3* revels in throwing you to the wolves – alone and without the community comfort of Vault 101. Your most constant companion comes in the form of the 'Pip-Boy 3000' – essentially a handheld computer that'll happily feed you statistics on your health and quests while also enabling access to your inventory. The fact that all these menu screens come in the form of a wearable device does much to bolster a feel of neatness and smooth edges within the title. All things considered, it's one of the most enjoyable and well put together introductory sections we've found in such a game world.

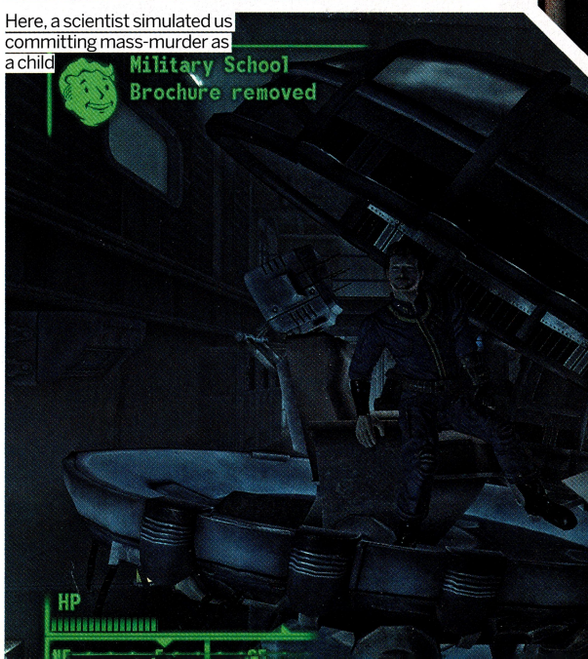
Once inside it, you'll find that *Fallout 3*'s Washington DC is something of a surprising place. If we were in charge of the beautification of any particular area, one of the last things we'd likely consider doing would be nuking the place – radioactive explosions do not a pretty place make. All the more odd, then, to find that *Fallout 3* features some truly spectacular visuals. Buildings strong enough to survive the atomic blasts loom over piles of rubble and only just-recognisable streets. Character models are smooth and intricately detailed, and while there's certainly an abundance of grey to be found across the textures, light often falls across them in such a way as to make them attractive. Walking up to a building's ruined carcass with the sun behind it will reveal beams of light shining over and through it in strangely tranquil fashion. This sunlight casts attractive shadows across a world that, despite the developer's heritage in the *Elder Scrolls* games and resultant similarities to *Oblivion*, is recognisably of the *Fallout* series.

Things are no doubt as bleak as you'd expect in the post-apocalyptic circumstances: people walk around in rags (many of whom are several quarks short of a proton), buildings have been rustled together from old bits of scrap metal and

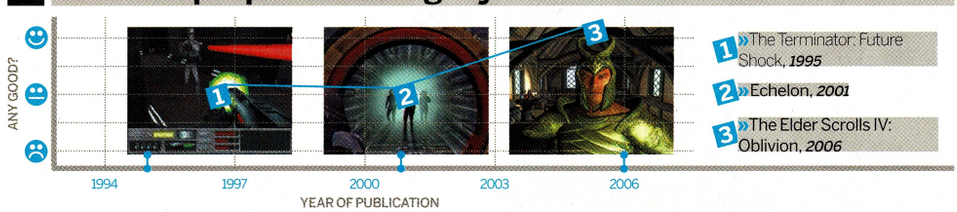
VATS, your 'assisted targeting system' adds a new and unique touch to the title's combat



Here, a scientist simulated us committing mass-murder as a child



From the people who brought you...



1 »The Terminator: Future Shock, *1995*

2 »Echelon, *2001*

3 »The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion, *2006*

"We'd even killed our love interest's dad, which made things more awkward than they could have been"

The Fat Man mini-nuke launcher is the gift that keeps on giving

Seems like something's going down in there, shame we can't get in and unleash our Assault Rifle

Second opinion

» *Fallout 3* boasts the perfect blend of action FPS and adventure RPG. Every corner of the Wasteland is worthy of exploration, and you'll almost certainly want to play it twice.

Russell Barnes

animals sport disturbing mutations – the old two-headed cow is back for an encore. It's a dark, grim and unsettling environment, but one that's been infused with trademark touches of comedy, and people you meet will sometimes make light of their predicaments in stoic fashion. Provided you're 'within range of the transmitters', haunting Fifties beats can accompany your travels, along with news relevant to the main plot or propaganda churned out by the 'enclave'. Through hundreds of pieces of detail, such as the exhibits within a ruined museum, including a Vault-Tec Vault re-creation, *Fallout 3* creates a world that will never fail to interest you.

Nothing feels as if it's been overlooked – even something as insignificant as a swing-out bridge will just feel 'right', giving a heavy shudder as it clunks into position. You won't even tire of travelling over the world's large distances. Once you've discovered a location, your Pip-Boy can 'quick transport' you to it, provided you're not being attacked at the time. Perhaps it's cheating a little, but it's easily justified, as the game world is so expansive. The only slight disappointment we found in this regard came in the form of the underground metro tunnels. They're occasionally repetitive, and an area that serves to illustrate that no virtual world can sprawl on forever, with destroyed trains and cave-ins blocking off routes.

When day turns to night, the atmosphere shifts from deceptive safety to affirmed peril. Finding yourself pursued by a pack of mutant dogs on a dark night in the wastelands is certainly a sinister experience. Indeed, *Fallout 3*'s wildlife can serve to make your travels less serene whatever the time on the clock. Enemies range from mutant animals such as the decidedly unstrokeable 'Molerat' and flame-throwing 'Fire Ant' to more humanoid 'Super Mutants' and meathead chums. Dispersed liberally around, you'll never be far away from a being that wouldn't be opposed to eating you or giving you a savage, fatal beating during your journeying. Happily, creatures are indicated on your radar so are avoidable if you're low on armour or ammunition.

Inevitably, there are times when it's not helpful to turn tail and give it legs, so combat's unavoidable. There's a healthy array of weaponry on offer, ranging from nailboards to sniper rifles, flamethrowers and miniguns. While it's possible to shoot as you would in an FPS from the game's standard first or, less enjoyable, third-person views, 'VATS' (or 'Vault-Tec Assisted Targeting System) is a unique addition. This comes, essentially, as a hybrid of real-time and turn-based combat. On activating it, time pauses – often leaving an adversary in the final stages of connecting his sledgehammer with your head – and you're left to choose which part of your foe's body you'll be going for. You've got a varying chance »

Large, strong and aggressive super mutants often turn up at inconvenient times

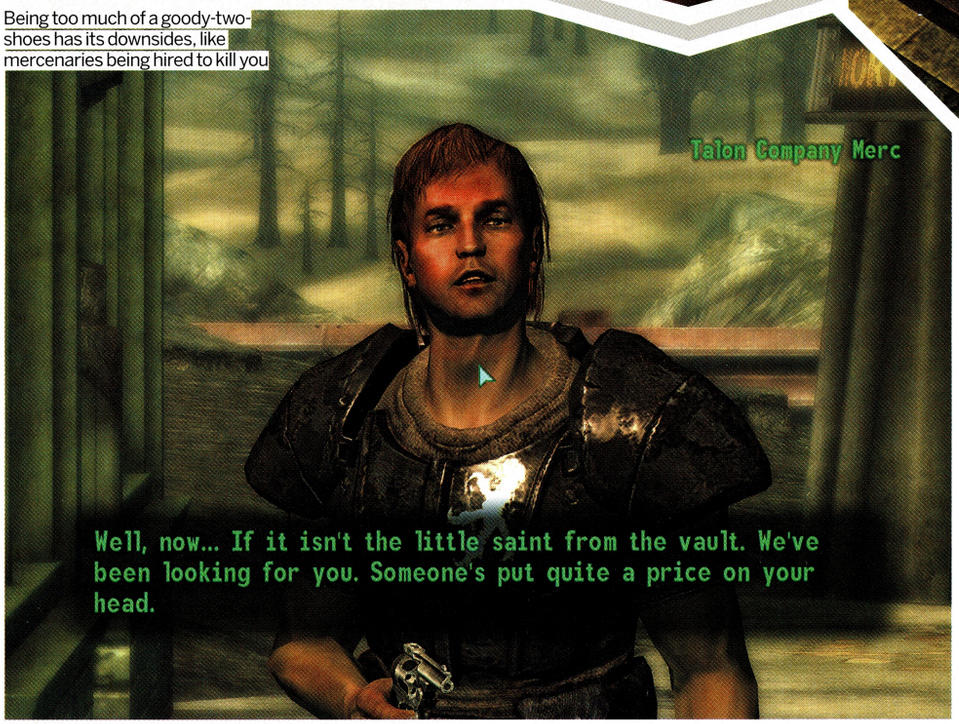
The Brotherhood of Steel are still fighting the good fight

Fallout 3 has a beautiful and expansive game world, as well as engaging plot lines with well-written dialogue. For the most part things feel very non-linear.

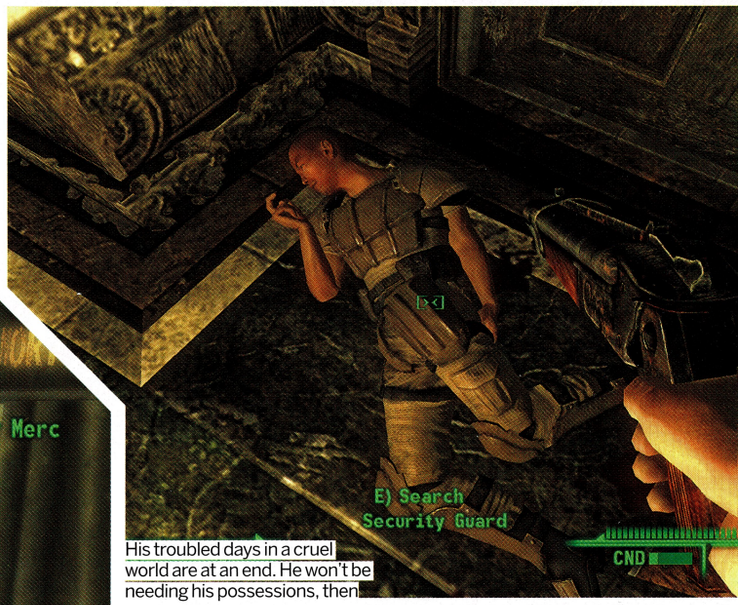
Upside/downside

The character animation is stiff and not on par with the visuals, and the underground sections can get repetitive. Though rare, there are some minor AI quirks.

We've heard that intimidating-looking 'Power Armor' is all the rage this season

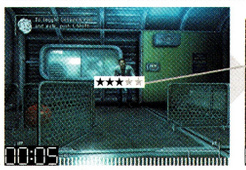


Being too much of a goody-two-shoes has its downsides, like mercenaries being hired to kill you

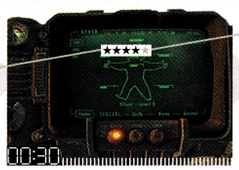


His troubled days in a cruel world are at an end. He won't be needing his possessions, then

First impressions last A gameplay snapshot

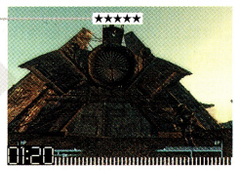


It's been a busy day – we've been born into the dark steely confines of Vault 101.



We're now ten years old and have been given our very own Pip-Boy 3000.

We've fled the Vault – our childhood sweetheart wooing attempts didn't work.



Things are looking up as we're getting to know Megaton. It's not exactly luxury, but it'll do.

of hitting different parts with different rewards – shooting for the head can end things nice and sharpish, while targeting arms can disarm and leg shots will slow your foe down.

Only serving to add to the dark tone of the title, many combat situations will result in decapitations running into a number the French Revolution could only have dreamed of. Certainly worthy of its 18 rating, we were often taken aback at the exaggerated violence within *Fallout 3* and how easily it's found. We've all given people vital to our quests and story development playful shots to the head only for nothing to happen, but when we tried it on our hovering house robot, we received a flamethrower to the face. Our loyal servant had become an angry adversary. Our choice and freedom to do as we wished had been our undoing.

You'll never feel you're travelling a well-trodden path within *Fallout 3*. Things always feel, well... organic – unusual, as it's not a word that springs to mind when radiation's involved. Early on, we found ourselves making a beautifully big decision (that's if you class whether or not to blow hundreds of people up as big) that would have significant

"A few minutes later, he'd keeled over and left us with no other choice than to nick his stuff"

The joy of mini-nukes: for those DC dead spots that just haven't been irradiated enough

effects on how we played through the rest of the title. More decisions and dilemmas come thick and fast. Sometimes you'll make them without even realising it. Within hours of our father's disappearance, our actions had already resulted in the deaths of two characters that we had assumed would be of some importance to our questing. We'd even killed our love interest's dad, which made things more awkward than they could have been.

Of course, in order to aid you along the way, your range of skills (including melee, light and heavy weaponry competencies) can be honed and improved. Across the title's 20 levels, you'll earn skill points that can then be allocated to various specialisations. Broadly speaking, non-weapon-related skills come under two categories: enlightened pillar of the community or dodgy scoundrel. It's possible, for instance, to boost your skills of persuasion and charm NPCs with increased speech skills, or become an accomplished medic or mechanic and heal people and machinery (your weapons will become damaged and non-functional having seen too much combat). Alternatively, you may want to become a cunning lock-pick (one of our favourites) or scientist (allowing you to unleash '1337 h4xx0r sk1llz' on electronic stuff). Should you meet a lock or terminal's level, you'll be confronted with a mini-game. Lock-picking requires a sweet spot to be found via careful use of the WASD keys and mouse, and to find a terminal's password you'll be given a certain number of attempts and be told how many of your guessed word's letters are correct. To reach the dizzying heights of Level 20, you'll need to earn XP by completing quests, engaging in combat, picking locks, finding new locations and hacking computer terminals. With each level, you're able to allocate the skill points you've acquired before choosing a 'perk'. Such perks typically boost skills even further, improving accuracy or speech skills, for example, but soon become dramatically more exciting, such as enlisting the services of certain wild animals to aid you in combat like some kind of evil Dr Dolittle.

Choosing the dark side is, as in the real world, a more risky strategy if you're looking for universal adulation and admiration. On several occasions, we found ourselves being shot at by swarms of angry residents having been silly enough to thieve something or attempt a bit of lockpickery within plain view of unimpressed witnesses. In particular, we found that loitering near armouries will put you on the receiving end of some mob justice. Adding a further layer of difficulty to the criminal lifestyle is the fact that your actions will have an effect on your 'karma'. Spend your time stealing rather than buying, and interactions with NPCs will tend to be more negative in tone as they'll quite rightly believe you're an untrustworthy so-and-so. A hippy-like inclination to help the needy you encounter will boost your karma, get you gifts from other do-gooders and undoubtedly give you a 'warm fuzzy feeling' inside.

Ammunition and health pickups within *Fallout 3*, especially for fans of the 'guns blazing' approach like us, can be painfully and troublingly thin on the ground. This isn't a title where you'll find it effortless to pick up bullets by the bucketload. Until we'd become better at rationing ourselves, gained the self-control to avoid spraying bullets around unnecessarily and avoiding being mortally wounded by even the weakest of adversaries, the sound of our character's heartbeat throughout the early quests was more noticeable than any radio station. Chancing across some medical relief is often cruelly followed up with more injury, especially once you've blundered onto land occupied by 'Raiders' – hostile *Mad Max* types with a penchant for making your life difficult.

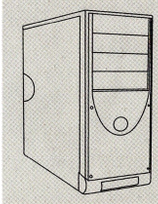
There are various doctors around the world map along with shops and lone traders who'll sell you items to aid in inflicting or reducing injury, but all these ultimately amount to little unless you get to grips with the game's inventory system and learn to regulate your own body. This is achieved by counterbalancing the health kicks you'll receive from irradiated food items with radiation-reducing medication to stave of radiation sickness. Also thrown into the mix are performance-enhancing drugs such as 'Psycho', which will temporarily increase the damage you cause. Too much, as we found, will lead to an overdose and trigger an addiction, which ain't a good thing. You're not the only one who'll suffer this, though – a selfless act of charity had us donate some drugs to an NPC with a habit. A few minutes later, he'd keeled over and left us with no other choice than to nick his stuff. Picking out only the items you feel you'll need for a particular quest while storing the rest will also free up much-needed space for new aid items, weapons or armour.

Fallout 3 is simply dizzying in a variety of ways – the world is huge, diverse and full of tiny details too numerous to list. Dialogue is snappy and well written, and though NPC's animations are a tad on the stiff side, the ruined wastelands of Washington DC are as engaging and bewitching as they are brutal. You'll laugh at the seamlessly integrated pieces of comic relief as often as you'll wince at the visceral clips of your limbless body biting the dust, usually thanks to over-optimistic battling with foes you're not yet well enough equipped to fend off. *Fallout 3* cracks the problem of integrating FPS-style combat into a role-playing game's structure more so than any other action RPG. Its depth and detailed brilliance is deserving of high praise indeed, and perhaps worthy of something that has never been awarded before, whatever that could be...

Oliver Mather

TOTAL PCGaming GAME OF THE MONTH

Tech specs



»requirements

CPU 2.4GHz
RAM 1GB XP/2GB Vista
GRAPHICS GeForce 6800/Radeon X850

We say

High settings ran very comfortably on our test-bed, not far beyond the recommended specs. For trouble-free ultra-high quality settings you'll want something marginally, but not dramatically, beefier.

Performance anxiety

How do the graphic settings affect the look of the game?

»maximum detail

The most attractive unattractive environments we've seen in a while

»minimum detail

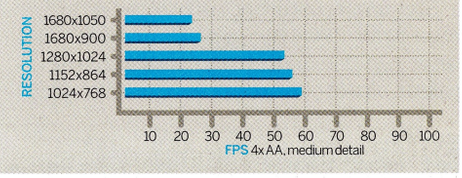
Textures and lighting effects both take a significant hit in quality

»Technical tip

Ditch the HDR for a performance increase, but have a look at other options, such as the numerous tweakable 'fade' settings. There's certainly plenty to customise.

»fps vs resolution

E6600 3GHz, 2GB RAM, Nvidia 8800GT OC2, XP 32-bit



Verdict

Vast, visceral and every inch of it is worthy of the highest acclaim. Pure genius.

10

People with quests for you are helpfully highlighted with a massive question mark above their head.

In three words **Marvellous. Multiplayer. Hack-'n'-slash.**

SACRED 2: FALLEN ANGEL

The Diablo-'em-up returns with a stonking second instalment

Details **PRICE** £34.99 | **BEST PRICE** £24.99 (Play.com) | **GENRE** Action RPG
DEVELOPER Ascaron | **PUBLISHER** Deep Silver | **WEB** www.sacred2.com

When the original *Sacred* was released in 2004, it divided both the gaming community and the critics like oil and water. Those who fell under its spell of addictive, *Diablo*-esque combat were instantly smitten, while those expecting something with a little more depth were left sadly disappointed. Needless to say, the game fared well enough at retail to establish a passionate gamer community, and it's this that's paved the way to the development of a sequel – the cunningly named *Sacred 2*.

Sticking to the motto 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it', *Sacred 2* follows pretty much the same formula as the original game, with the scale turned up way past 11. For starters, the game's been given a stunning graphical overhaul, and is now rendered in full 3D with an array of visual effects. When you see the way rain makes the streams ripple or watch the grass sway in the breeze, it's obvious that this a world away from the original game, with over 22 square miles of game world to explore.

Such an amount of land is a lot of ground to cover by any RPG's standard – it's six square miles larger than *Oblivion*, fact fans – but Ascaron has pulled it off well by creating a world that's so utterly packed with things to see and do you'll never feel lost or without purpose. *Sacred*'s map is filled with dungeons, cities, bandit camps and, most importantly, enemies that need slaying, keeping you busy as you progress to the next objective. The main storyline alone consists of around 100 quests, and with hundreds of side-quests, chores and other challenges for you to complete, we're talking about a *Baldur's Gate 2*-sized adventure here – even if the story isn't up to much.

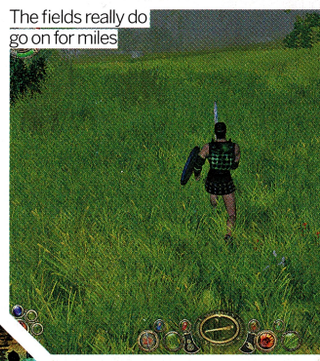
Set in the land of Ancaria, 2,000 years before the events of the original game, *Sacred 2*'s storyline revolves around a mysterious substance called T-Energy – a blue goop that apparently governs all life and thought. It was once controlled exclusively by the ancient Seraphim, but as the years passed, the Seraphim grew weary and passed control over to the High Elves. However, all was not well, as a power struggle soon erupted between the different factions of High Elves. Corrupted by power, a bloody civil war developed, leaving a society in tatters and no one to govern the T-Energy. Without anyone to control it, the T-Energy transformed and spread throughout the land, turning innocent animals into mutated killing machines. And this is where you come in.

Chopsy adolescent hoodies are everywhere these days – teach those chavs a lesson

Second opinion

» *Sacred 2* makes almost same leap in technology that Blizzard is currently doing for *Diablo 3*. The move move from isometric to 3D and the expansive world is very compelling.

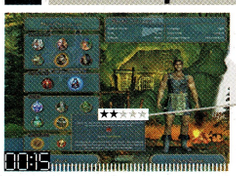
Ben Biggs



The fields really do go on for miles

The dungeons seem to have borrowed a lot of their look from *Oblivion*

First impressions last a gameplay snapshot



Create your character, choose your allegiance and listen to the awesome tune in the intro.

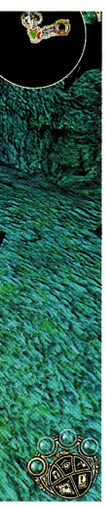
By now you've gained a few levels, but the enemies still offer no resistance.

Delve into the online multiplayer and gain some more levels.

You still cannot manage to tear yourself away. Must... level... up...

Your foes hide in the long grass, waiting to pounce when you least expect it...

"With hundreds of side-quests, chores and other challenges for you to complete, we're talking about a Baldur's Gate 2-sized adventure here"



Sacred 2 actually has two story paths – a light and a dark path, and the two are cleverly interlinked. For example, in the evil path you may find yourself having to kill someone, whereas in the light path, you'll be defending that person from a mysterious aggressor. This adds a fair amount of replay value to the already epic campaign.

The problem with this is it could have been a standout feature for the game and a certain deal-clincher, were it not for the fact that the story is pretty much non-existent. That *Sacred 2* has been described as the closest you can get to an offline MMO is a surprisingly accurate comparison as, like most MMOs, it has next-to-no story-based character development or emotional attachment. Instead, like an MMO, *Sacred 2* is all about the multiplayer...

Much like the original, *Sacred 2* has a strong bent towards online play, with support for 16 players in PvP and five players in PvE. Brilliantly, you can hop straight out of your campaign and into a friend's multiplayer game whenever you choose; even more impressively, all the stats, equipment and experience you gather while playing online will stay with your character when you leave.

Quests you complete online will be reflected in your offline progress, so teaming up with a friend to take on a particularly nasty enemy, or getting together a group of adventurers for a trip into a dungeon is the order of the day here, and if our experience is anything to go by, you won't have much trouble finding a party willing to accompany you. *Sacred* had a pretty hardcore fan base, which seems to have transferred over to the sequel pretty well, meaning the servers are already well populated with experienced and knowledgeable players.

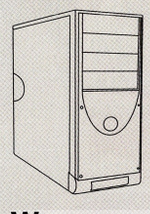
There are six different character classes to choose from, although only one – the Seraphim, has been carried over from the original game. Disappointingly, there's little in the way of character customisation, with the only outwardly noticeable difference between the classes seemingly cosmetic. Having said this, the character models are all nicely detailed, with the females obviously having been designed to appeal to the 18-30 male demographic. We doubt a skimpy leather bikini offers that much protection against a sword.

But as good as most of *Sacred 2* is, there are still a few gaping problems – the worst of which being the graphics engine. Yes, it looks pretty good, but there's no way in hell it should eat our systems like it does. Our machine runs *Far Cry 2* and *Crysis Warhead* smoothly on Full and High detail respectively, yet on *Sacred 2*'s High setting, our frames per second (fps) dropped to as low as two. This lack of optimisation, coupled with a rather buggy original release that's already been patched twice, may leave fans (and potential converts) of *Sacred* with a bad taste in their mouths.

If you're looking for thrills and spills in a good-looking and expansive fantasy world, then *Sacred 2* does pretty much everything it can do right. As far as basic hack-and-slashers go, this improves on the original in pretty much every way, but if you're looking for an in-depth experience, you'd do well to avoid it. Get some friends playing online or set up a LAN game, however, and you'll wonder where the hours went.

Ian Morris

Tech specs



»requirements

CPU 2.4GHz
RAM 1GB RAM
GRAPHICS 256MB GeForce 6800/ ATI equivalent

We say

Our system's pretty much in line with the recommended specs, yets Sacred 2 runs at inconsistent speeds in unexpected places. Don't even think about running High on anything other than a bleeding-edge system.

Performance anxiety

How do the graphic settings affect the look of the game?

»maximum detail

It's barely worth maxxing out the advanced settings for the difference it makes

»minimum detail

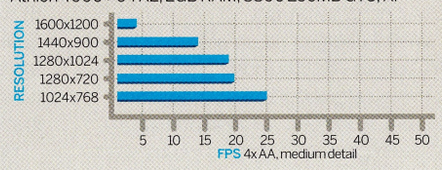
The shadows have gone, and grass now magically springs out of the ground in front of you

»Technical tip

Mid-end system gamers should set Sacred 2 to medium settings for a marked framerate increase at minimal cost to the visuals.

»fps vs resolution

Athlon 4000+ 64 X2, 2GB RAM, 8800 256MB GTS, XP

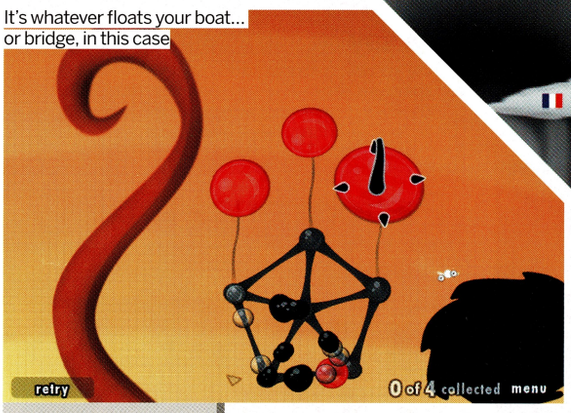


Verdict

Sacred 2 has a passable single-player mode, but it comes into its own online with the right company.

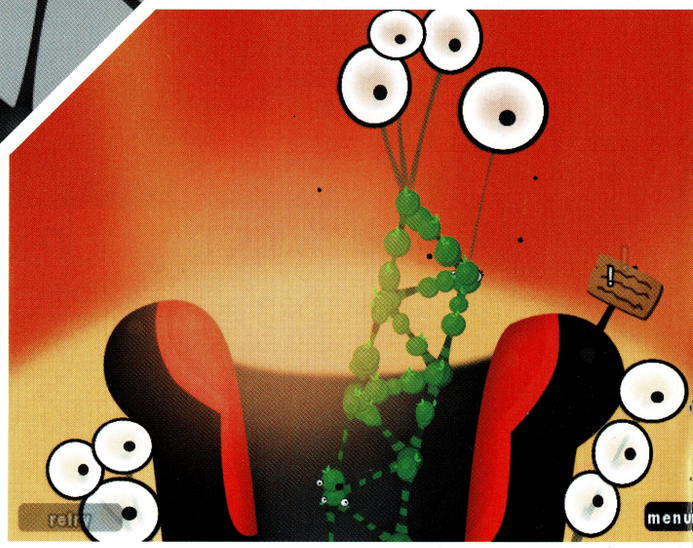
8

It's a bad, bad day to fly a kite, and more so float a goo ball



It's whatever floats your boat... or bridge, in this case

The infinite sky's the limit in Corporation mode



In three words **Gooey. Sticky. Delicious.**

WORLD OF GOO

Right up there with mud wrestling and swimming in baked beans

Details **PRICE** $20 (approx £12) | **BEST PRICE** $20 | **GENRE** Puzzle
DEVELOPER In-house | **PUBLISHER** 2D Boy | **WEB** www.2dboy.com

To this day we still don't know what that pot of gelatinous green stuff was made of; the gunk all children should have come into contact with by the age of eight via a trip to the joke shop, a playground prank or Halloween trick-or-treating. But we wouldn't be surprised if this amorphous lump of squidgy stuff was the inspiration for 2DBoy's *World Of Goo*. The two have a lot in common after all: they're squishy, cheap, accessible and have the capacity to entertain for hours on end. They're non-toxic and suitable for children, too.

What 'Pot-o-goo' doesn't have that *World Of Goo* oozes is subtle nostalgic influences from several granddaddies of the games industry. *World Of Goo* heralds from a timeless age of puzzle games – *Lemmings* and *Worms* are in there, and stepping away from the PC platform there's definitely more than a hint of *LocoRoco* going on. The idea of the game is to stick a limited number of goo balls together until the resulting structure is within reach of an open pipe, which will then suck your remaining goo balls away. To complete the level and move onto the next you must save a certain number of balls, but as ever with the best puzzlers, the simplicity of the concept disguises the sophistication and difficulty of the game.

Driving the two-dimensional extravaganza, cutesy goo-goo noises and retro puzzle concept, there's a seriously sophisticated game mechanic with physics easily worthy of the 'next-generation' moniker. Your construction, be it bridge, tower or Brunelian brain-fart, will both look and act like the blueprint for an architect's reject. Build it too tall or wide or apply too many goo balls to one side and it will collapse somewhat unpredictably under the weight. There's a certain inherent flexibility in the bonds between the balls too, so any large construction will sway perilously, especially in the strong breezes in some of the levels.

Naturally, 2DBoy has taken advantage of this mechanic and made a variety of different goo balls to mix and match. Depending on the level, you'll have access to standard black balls that form permanent bonds, detachable green balls, teardrop transparent balls, tri-bond albino balls and a myriad of other species of balls besides. You'll have to work to the strengths of each species to bridge the space between your starting point and the pipe, which sometimes means racing ahead to overcome the physics that will inevitably bring your Babelian tower crashing down.

The stroke of genius comes with the online leaderboard, though. Not only can hardcore players replay each level in an effort to achieve the OCD Challenge criteria (either rescuing a minimum number of balls or completing the level in a certain time), but there's the Corporation mode too. Every ball you rescue beyond the minimum threshold for completion is collected into this competitive mode, where the idea is simply to build the tallest tower possible, competing against people from across the globe whose towers are represented by small clouds. The single-player mode might be short-lived, but take *World Of Goo* online and you've got an excellent distraction from any big budget release this year.

Ben Biggs

Verdict

It's cheap, 62MB to download, DRM-free and highly addictive.

8

Tech specs

»requirements
CPU 1GHz
RAM 512MB
GRAPHICS 64MB 3D graphics

We say

World Of Goo is low-spec, as any good indie title should be. Any machine built within the last five years should take it well into stratospheric frame rates.

»Technical tip

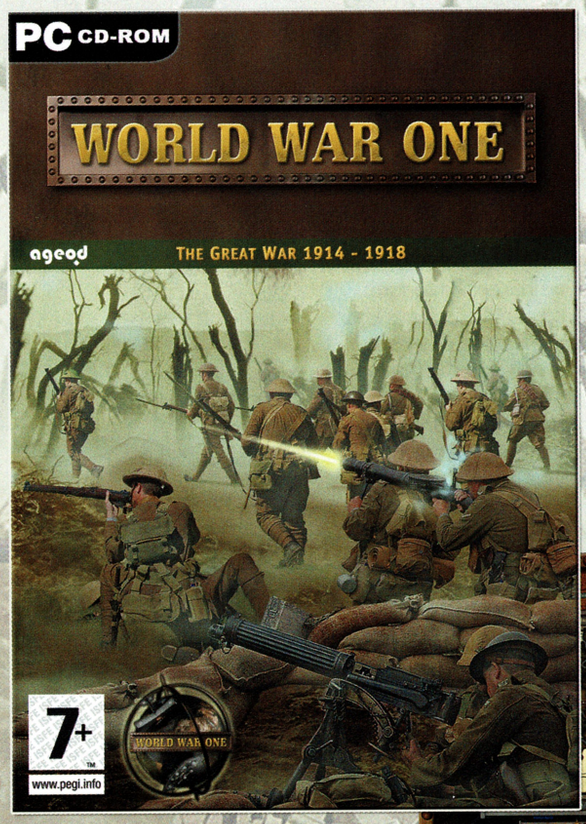
? Your bottleneck, if any, is most likely to be memory or CPU-related as graphics aren't cutting edge. At this level a RAM or processor upgrade will cost peanuts.

"A successful formula" - HonestGamers.co.uk

WORLD WAR ONE

THE GREAT WAR 1914 - 1918

NOVEMBER 2008



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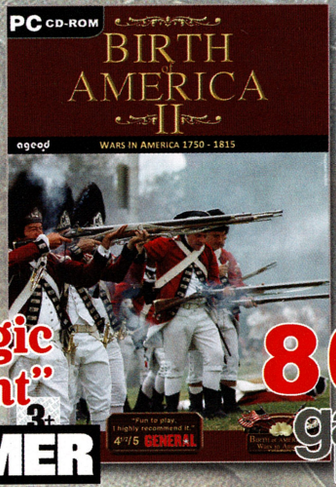
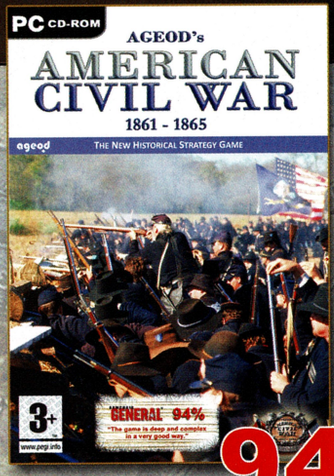


"A strategic delight"
PC GAMER

80%
games radar



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PC DVD-ROM

ASCARON

In three words **Repetitive. Off-road. Racing.**

PURE

ATV Racing – trick, rinse, repeat

Pull off tricks to fill up your boost, and gain the ability to perform more impressive stunts

Details **PRICE** £29.99 | **BEST PRICE** £17.99 (Play.com) | **GENRE** Off-road racer
DEVELOPER Black Rock Studio | **PUBLISHER** Disney | **WEB** www.purevideogame.com

***Pure* didn't exactly get off to the best start with us.** After giving us a fancy-looking installation screen with all the standard options, we ticked all the relevant boxes and proceeded with the installation. All was going well, we thought. But then it started playing music. This would be okay if the song had actually changed, but it didn't. So for close to 20 minutes we were aurally assaulted by Wolfmother's Woman over and over again.

In short doses, the screeching tones of Andrew Stockdale can be fine, but after tolerating them for close to 20 minutes, they start to make you want to gouge out your own eyeballs with a rusted fork, if only to offer some distraction from the noise. *Pure* could have learnt a lot from this, as good games, much like good music, need variety. And sadly, that's something *Pure* is lacking.

It all sounded so good as well. With off-road racing, customisable ATVs and up to sixteen competitors in a race, this could have filled a gap in the PC market, but instead, with its 'middle of the road' positioning and lack of any real standout features, it just ends up becoming repetitive all too soon.

The main mode of the game is the career mode, and after picking one of seven incredibly annoying, 'diverse' characters, the point of the game is to progress through a series of championships, each of which consists of up to seven events. As you complete the events, you'll unlock points, and you'll have to amass a certain amount of points to unlock the next championship.

There are three types of events found in *Pure* – race, sprint and freestyle. The only problem is, other than the names, there seems to be very little difference between the race and the sprint, with the only real standout being the freestyle mode. Setting you the challenge of gaining the highest amount of trick points out of an entire field of riders, Freestyle blends racing and tricks pretty well, forcing a constant trade-off between speed and style.

However, the tricking mechanics aren't all that good, either. If you don't have a gamepad, you may as well not bother trying, as *Pure* requires so many keys it'd be impossible to set up well on a keyboard. As you hit a jump, you can press a button (and move an analogue stick in a certain direction) to pull off a specific trick. The more tricks you pull off, the more advanced tricks you'll be able to perform, with the twist being your trick power is also used for your boosts, leaving you with a difficult decision to make when you're in the final straights.

Possibly the highlight of the game, however, is the customisation of the ATVs. While you probably have to be a bit of an ATV nut to get the most out of it, anyone can sit down and enjoy piecing together a bike of their choosing – and with a staggering 65,000 possible combinations, you can be sure of your bike standing out from the pack. As much as an ATV can.

Overall, though, there's really very little that makes *Pure* stand out. It's not a bad racing game, but it's not amazing, and as such can't really be recommended over the rest of the pack.

Ian Morris

Verdict

Entertaining in short doses, but severely lacking in variation.

6

Tech specs

»requirements
CPU 2.6GHz dual-core
RAM 2GB RAM
GRAPHICS 128MB Nvidia GeForce 7600

We say

Pure isn't the most graphically intensive of games. In fact, it looks pretty dull in places, so your rig should be fine.

»Technical tip

? There's very little difference between high and low settings in both quality and performance. Turning off shadows always helps.

The customisation is top notch – you can spend hours tricking out your ride

With plenty of riders on the same course, you can be sure of tussles for places

HAVE YOUR SAY about *Pure* on our forum at www.totalpcgaming.com/forum

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Lara's preparing a YouTube video response to the Tron Guy video

A good example of the camera problems when climbing or lining up a jump

In three words **Beautiful. Frustrating. Adventure.**

TOMB RAIDER: UNDERWORLD

Like a bull in a china shop, Lara smashes her way back onto the PC

Details **PRICE** £34.99 | **BEST PRICE** £24.98 (Amazon.co.uk) | **GENRE** Action adventure
DEVELOPER Crystal Dynamics | **PUBLISHER** Eidos Interactive | **WEB** www.tombraider.com

She may be the queen of computer games, but Lara Croft is currently going through a rough patch. Her latest adventure begins with a bang as she finds herself escaping from the ruins of her burning mansion. But that's not all, as moments later she's under fire from her own friends. It's a fantastic opening that not only sets the scene, but also plays as a mini-tutorial, helping players to get reacquainted with the controls.

Picking up the plot from *Tomb Raider: Legend*, *Underworld* finds Lara on a quest for Thor's Hammer – a mythical artefact that can crush mountains into valleys and more shifting power than a bulldozer, but if you're not up to speed on the story, you can watch a short 'previously' video on the in-game menu. Keeley Hawes (of Ashes To Ashes fame) reprises her role as Lara for the third time. A star in her own right, Keeley elevates the voice acting to the highest of standards. Lara's sidekicks are voiced with similar quality, indeed the audio throughout stands out as polished and professional – the music being particularly rousing and cinematic. The graphics have seen a large improvement too: a new lighting system projects shadow and light with an uncanny brilliance, the foliage is denser and Lara now brushes it aside whenever she rushes past.

But secretly *Underworld* is all about destruction. It's as though Lara was forced to watch an entire series of *Time Team* with her eyes held open by rusty clamps. She drop-kicks Peruvian vases into thousands of tiny pieces with apparent glee, and destroys the tranquil peace of long-abandoned tombs with heavy boulders. Her displays of frustration don't end there as she quickly takes it upon herself to wipe out the local wildlife with the enthusiasm of a bloodthirsty hunter. Rare species of tiger are shot to pieces in frenzied firefights, and flocks of bats are punched into a gloopy mess because they happened to be in her way. This is before we mention the native insects that find themselves obliterated, sharks peppered with bullet holes and a spectacular set-piece involving an aged and rather tired-looking octopus - the Kraken. Lara takes us through one glorious party of destruction with you as her guest. Of course, the *Tomb Raider* series has always been about battling wildlife and exploring exotic locations, and thankfully this is a proud return to form. You'll spend the majority of your time exploring cavernous temples and spectacular ruins. Other notable locations involve a sinking ship and the vaults of the Croft manor, the latter of which oozes atmosphere.

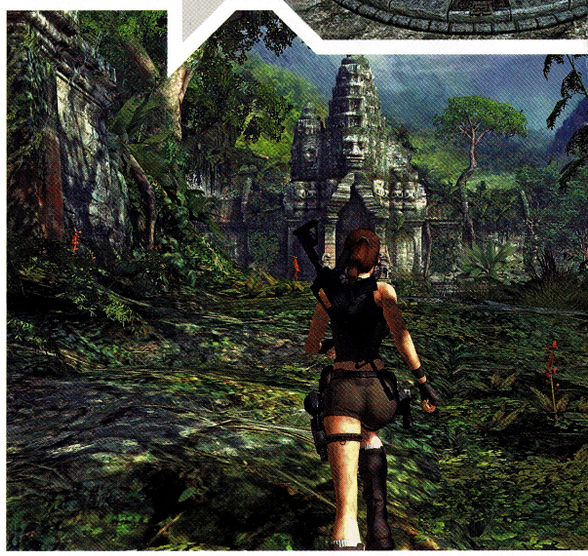
There are a few new additions to *Underworld*. Lara can now leap from wall to wall up tall structures. You're required to use this new skill with surprising frequency, but only in specific locations the developer has chosen. You now have sonar included with your PDA, which scans the area around Lara and displays it as a small flyable map. It's handy for scoping out secret areas, but not much else use. One other notable addition is that the game automatically scales your health, weapon damage and other stats depending on how you play. This on-the-fly customisation is a rather clever way of adapting

We're trying not to lower the tone of this review, so we'll just talk about Lara's fantastic twin guns

Second opinion

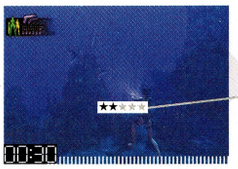
» Crystal Dynamics has returned to the roots of the series and come up trumps with *Underworld*. Shame about the technical issues, but it's good to see a return to form for *Tomb Raider*.
Ben Biggs

The worst puzzle in the game. Seeing this shot fills us with dread



"The climbing system reminds us of Assassin's Creed, only with less hooded cloaks and more hot pants"

First impressions last a gameplay snapshot



After the games cinematic opening you find yourself diving beneath the sea.

It's time for a spot of hypnotic rock climbing on the coast of Thailand.

Lara's in the basement, probably looking for items to sell at Sunday's car boot sale.

Tomb raiding in Mexico. Contains possibly the most frustrating puzzle in the game.

the game to the individual styles of the player. This means if you're not very good at shooting enemies you can spend less time worrying about your health. It's a subtle change to the game, and if not to your preference you can fiddle with the individual settings from the game's menu.

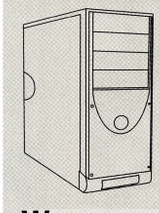
Much has been said about the game's new animation system. Most of it is true, and Lara now has a larger repository of animation and she moves with more fluidity and realism. Motion capture has been used extensively and is mixed with key-framed animation – it makes watching Lara climb a rocky cliff strangely hypnotic. She grabs hold of rocks and ledges with a fluid movement while her backside wiggles from side-to-side. It reminds us of the climbing system found in *Assassin's Creed*, only with less hooded cloaks and more hot pants. It's far from perfect, however, and at times it still feels like you're controlling a string puppet. In a split second, Lara twitches from balancing on a beam to leaping sideways through the air, resulting in mistimed jumps and frustrating falls off scenery. Swimming underwater is even more of a twitch-fest. Lara darts up and down with little precision making underwater exploration difficult.

That's not the only aspect of the game to run into trouble, as the camera can only be described as unpredictable. When Lara finds herself in an enclosed space, the camera can get stuck on a small piece of scenery and spasm uncontrollably. When balancing on beams and ledges it occasionally swoops above Lara's head and focuses on her cleavage – unintentionally, of course. This isn't a show-stopper by any means, but even the most patient of gamers will find themselves gritting their teeth. Aside from camera issues, the puzzles can often be obscure and illogical, and most can only be completed by following the exact path and sequence set by the level designers. The levels themselves appear to be sprawling in size, but actually send you down limited paths. That's not to say you won't enjoy exploring the myriad of locations, but don't expect a wealth of routes and avenues to be present.

Even with it's niggling problems this is the best *Tomb Raider* game of recent years. The production values are high, and at times it's graphically mesmerising and runs without any frame rate issues. We may struggle to get the best camera angle of her, but it's still great to have Lara back on our PCs.

Tom Rudderham

Tech specs



»requirements
CPU 3GHz
RAM 1GB
GRAPHICS 6800GT or ATI 1800XT

We say

Underworld scales quite well, and even manages to look fantastic on lower-end systems. Make sure your graphics card has at least 256MB VRAM and you'll be good to go. Vista users will need 2GB RAM to counter any stuttering.

Performance anxiety

How do the graphic settings affect the look of the game?

»maximum detail
A truly beautiful adventure. Real-time shadows abound and the water looks amazing.

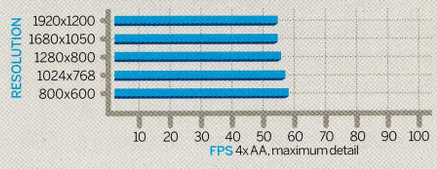
»minimum detail
Lara still looks amazing, but the textures take a large hit. No real-time shadows, either

»Technical tip

Although well optimised for medium-spec PCs, by turning off the real-time shadows and full-screen effects you'll get a considerable frame rate boost.

»fps vs resolution

Intel E6600 2.4GHz, 3GB RAM, 8800GTX, Vista 64



Verdict

A return to form with epic set-pieces. However, there are a few frustrating puzzles and camera issues.

7

HAVE YOUR SAY now about *Tomb Raider: Underworld* on our forum at **www.totalpcgaming.com/forum**

CUSTOMPLAY GOLF 2009

Sane golf

Details **PRICE** £19.99 | **BEST PRICE** £16.99 (Amazon.com) | **GENRE** Sports **DEVELOPER** CustomPlay | **PUBLISHER** Lexicon **WEB** tinyurl.com/customplaygolf2009

Ever since the Wii came along, golf games without motion-sensitive controls have struggled to meet expectations, but *CustomPlay Golf 2009* does a decent enough job of replacing the nine iron with a mouse.

The sensation of playing a hole right there on your desktop reduces the game in scope somewhat, but its effectiveness remains – the mechanics of play fit the limited movement of the mouse very well, and the ball responds accurately to the quality of your micro-swing.

Where the game leaves the consoles behind is in the sheer number of available holes. Alongside the 25 bundled courses, there's an ever-increasing amount of user-created content thanks to the intuitive course designer software. These courses can also be emailed to anyone to test out, regardless as to whether they actually own the game. Coupled with the online multiplayer, this makes *CustomPlay Golf 2009* a piece of software that keeps on giving.

Where it falls a little short is in raw entertainment. However you look at it, *CustomPlay Golf 2009* simply doesn't present itself as a fun game. It's a good representation of real golf, and is bulging with technical accuracy, but there's a lack of dynamism about the game that suggests its development was a very sombre experience. It really is one of those 'x' factor things, and while serious golfers looking for a simulator (rather than a game) will get their wish, anyone who has recently swung a Wii controller might well find it presents a terminally dry encounter.

Spanner Spencer

Verdict

A technical achievement with plenty of courses, but sorely lacking in vitality.

6

Tech specs

»requirements
CPU 2GHz
RAM 1GB
GRAPHICS 256MB DirectX 9.0c

In three words **Endless. Rigorous. Updated.**

GALACTIC CIVILIZATIONS II: ENDLESS UNIVERSE

More of a compilation than a sequel, but certainly lives up to its name

Details **PRICE** £29.99 | **BEST PRICE** £14.99 (Play.com) | **GENRE** Real-time strategy **DEVELOPER** Stardock | **PUBLISHER** Kalypso Media | **WEB** www.galciv2.com

What fans of the series need to be immediately aware of is this is a compilation of the last two expansions, *Dark Avatar* and *Twilight Of The Arnor.* Not that this should be considered any kind of criticism, as both these add-ons sported some excellent gameplay that really brought the *Galactic Civilization* franchise up to speed. But if you own them already, there might be little reason to part with any further cash.

Indeed, the only reason might be that they're standalone, so the convenience of such a neat package shouldn't be quickly overlooked. And if you don't own either expansion, but have enjoyed a rigorous jaunt around the original space-based RTS, then *Endless Universe* should be high on your list, since it really lives up to its name.

The second of the two original expansions came packed with graphical, AI and technological improvements along with an overhauled interface system, and it's this series of updates that take the fore in *Endless Universe.* Playing through the included campaigns is a great way to get started, but RTS stalwarts will undoubtedly find *Endless Universe* comes to life in the highly customisable sandbox mode.

Everything about the game can be shaped to suit your particular preferences, or tweaked to match whatever gaming mood you happen to be orbiting in. An expansive library of ship-building parts, weaponry and defensive technology enables you to create a fleet of spacecraft for any occasion, but it's in the environment modifications that your ideal game can be woven.

The ability to adjust the size of the galaxy (creating outer space expanses that would take months to complete, if so desired), the frequency of habitable planets, the evolutionary curve of the species and a host of other aspects make this a comprehensive tool for the serious sci-fi RTS gamer.

Unfortunately, it's rather lacking in terms of multiplayer, which is somewhat unforgivable these days considering the size of the game, otherwise *Endless Universe* could likely take on *Eve Online* in terms of scope. So close, but ultimately a few parsecs short of a light year.

Verdict

Impressive in size, but the lack of multiplayer might turn some strategists off.

7

Tech specs

»requirements
CPU 2.4GHz
RAM 1GB
GRAPHICS 256MB DirectX 9.0c

GEO-POLITICAL SIMULATOR

The world is a big place. Too big

Details **PRICE** £29.99
BEST PRICE £24.99 (Play.com)
GENRE Strategy | **DEVELOPER** In-house
PUBLISHER Eversim
WEB www.geo-political-simulator.com

There's a reason most strategy titles position you a little further down the political ladder and leave you to concentrate on blowing up the enemy rather than dealing with healthcare systems and departmental budgets. Running a country is more than a one-man job, and although *Geo-Political Simulator* provides a horde of aides and advisors, bureaucracy is seldom exciting.

Geo-Political Simulator offers you the opportunity to take command of any country in the world, and is loaded with enough information to make it a decidedly realistic experience. Without wanting to denigrate the efforts of any real-life country, running Belgium, for instance, doesn't really compare to overseeing Russia, so there's enough scope to cater for whatever depth of strategic gameplay you're looking for.

Unfortunately, the game becomes an exercise in virtual paper shuffling and political backbiting, and while this is undoubtedly what real state affairs are like (and, to be fair, that's what the game promises), engaging in it for fun is a demoralising experience.

But, if you dream of running Downing Street and dealing with officious politicians, this game pretty much rules the roost. Strategy game fans might balk at the looming depths of formality, though.

Spanner Spencer

Tech specs

»requirements
CPU 2GHz
RAM 1GB
GRAPHICS 128MB

Verdict

A concept that's ultimately too strained to provide much entertainment.

5

In three words **Charismatic. Frivolous. Droll.**

THE POLITICAL MACHINE

Pokes wry fun at the American presidential race, but can still challenge a happy strategist

Details **PRICE** £14.99 | **BEST PRICE** £11.98 (Amazon.co.uk) | **GENRE** Strategy | **DEVELOPER** Stardock **PUBLISHER** Kalypso Media | **WEB** www.politicalmachine.

Politics are rapidly replacing tanks in contemporary strategy, so it's good to see a game attempting to add a bit of breezy humour into the mix.

The Political Machine picks up before the agricultural reports and diplomatic back-stabbing comes into play, placing gamers in the role of a US presidential candidate attempting to shoehorn their way into power. And while it does successfully lighten the tone with the caricatured, bobblehead representations of famous American powermongers, the strategising is still as solid as any other political game currently available.

Your job as a candidate is to spread yourself and your views as liberally as possible across the USA: attending fundraisers, going on TV talk shows and giving speeches on a variety of issues in an attempt to win over as many states as possible. Each state has its own opinions and priorities, however, so winning over a local populace means preaching a sermon that particular choir wants to hear.

The Political Machine also plays heavily on personality, and even goes as far as factoring your candidate's charisma and energy levels into the presidential equation. An older candidate, for instance, doesn't have the energy to jet about the country the same, while younger players struggle to encourage much faith from the more conservative states.

Where the game feels to be lacking is in personal confrontations, however, which seems to be a huge part of a US election. One-on-one debates are noticeable by their absence, and the TV talk shows don't really test the character's mettle as well as they might. There is a terrific sense of urgency about the 41-week campaign that really adds tension to the game and ensures you can never perform an all-encompassing crusade. This adds a fair amount of replay value, as opinions shift so easily that a successful speech in one game will fall flat in the next.

You'll know instinctively if running a jovial political campaign is the sort of game you're likely to enjoy, and if that's you, *The Political Machine* will please. Otherwise, it's cheap enough to have a lash, but won't last particularly long.

Tech specs

»requirements
CPU 1GHz
RAM 512MB
GRAPHICS 64MB
DirectX 9.0c

Verdict

Makes light of politics in an entertaining way, but falls short on depth of strategy.

7

In three words **Foolish. Fun. Filler.**

STRONG BAD'S COOL GAME EP3

Strongbadia now has a new music mogul

Details **PRICE** $8.95 | **BEST PRICE** $8.95 (Telltalegames.com) | **GENRE** Point-and-click **DEVELOPER** In-house | **WEB** www.telltalegames.com/strongbad

We can empathise with Strong Bad for this third episode of *Strong Bad's Cool Game For Attractive People: Baddest of the Bands.* His Videlectrix Fun Machine has choked after a second dose of WD40 plus some moody DIY, and unless he gets a 'sack of cash' from goggle-eyed Bubs' concession stand, there'll be no more Snake Boxer or Math Kickers, and it'll definitely be the end of LimoZeen: Hot Babelien Odyssey. A shame, because it gets fried before you even have a chance to warm to it.

Fresh from besting the King of Town in last month's adventure, Strong Bad's problem is slightly more mundane, although the solution to getting his console fixed is far from standard and the means is as convoluted as ever. It's the third episode in, and the completely hair-brained plot will come as much a surprise to those that have been following the series as the loveable Mr Man visual theme is to those who haven't.

Raising the money to restore his beloved Fun Machine requires Strong Bad to become a record promoter, stage a gig and take a fat chunk of the royalties. Once again we enter into brainless point-and-click nonsense mode, where our immediate goals at best appear to have only a very tenuous relevance to Strong Bad's heart's desire. How on earth a plastic dinosaur, fake sword, aerosol cheese and a security template have anything to do with paving Strong Bad's way to industry credibility can only exist in Telltale's wild imaginings. But we've got used to suspending our disbelief ever since making that ridiculous King Of Town mannequin in *Episode 2*. Besides, if Mr. Strong could eat two dozen eggs a day and not suffer serious constipation, and Mr. Tickle could gleefully touch up Tickle Town without being placed on the sex offender's register, then surely the balloon-headed Strong Bad can make a heap of money in the promotions racket?

Episode 3 has vamped up the inventory system with a collectible items list, which includes any items you found in the last two episodes. This hardly adds any depth to the *Strong Bad's Cool Game* experience, but that's not the point. Just engage the sugar-craving, Ritalin-starved five-year-old in you and enjoy the utter barminess.

Ben Biggs

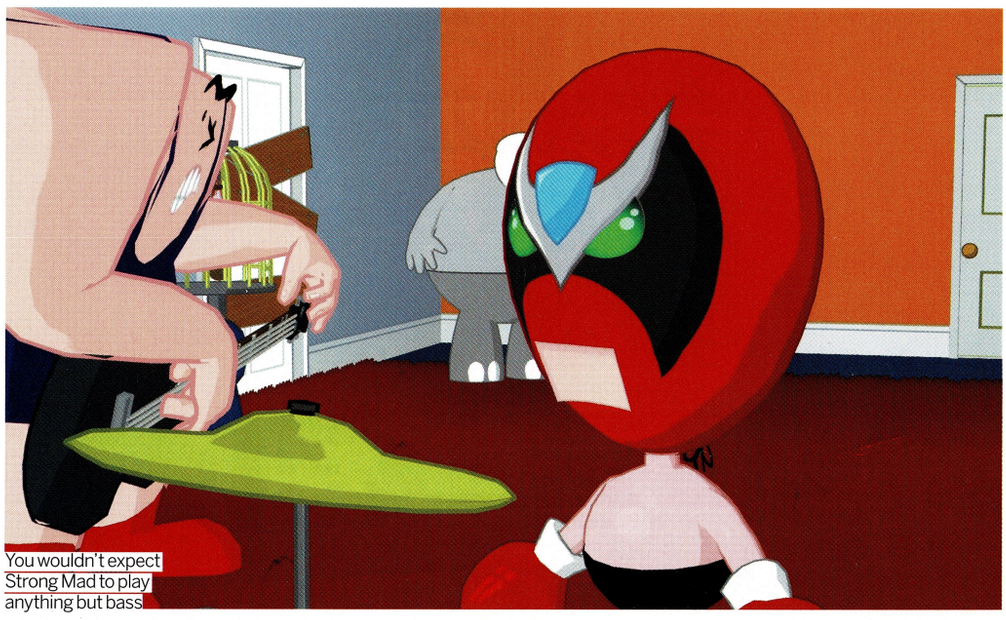
Verdict

Baddest Of The Bands is fun, forgettable and well worth the impulse buy.

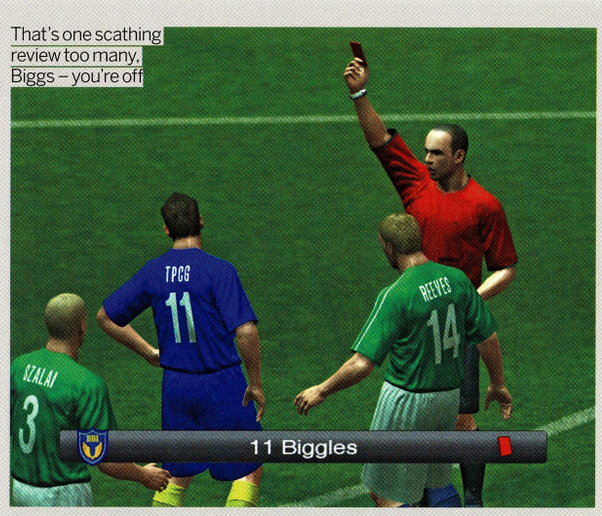
7

Tech specs

»requirements
CPU 1.5GHz
RAM 512MB
GRAPHICS 64MB



You wouldn't expect Strong Mad to play anything but bass



That's one scathing review too many, Biggs – you're off

PES 2009

Is the king of football games about to lose its crown?

Details **PRICE** £29.99 **BEST PRICE** £17.98 (Amazon.co.uk) | **GENRE** Football | **DEVELOPER** In-house **WEB** www.pesunites.com

Over the last decade, the common football title has gradually become the domain of the console, with PC ported in as an afterthought. It's not entirely unjustified, we think, as the likes of the 360 do grease the way to play this more casual of genres more easily than the PC. That's not much of an excuse for the shonky front-end that you get with *Pro Evolution Soccer 2009*, though. A 22-inch monitor, 8800GTX setup can't be that uncommon, so we're baffled why it doesn't support 16:9 for our resolution. Or functional vSync, for that matter – tearing seems like a major issue here.

We're not calling into question the game itself, as long as you have a 360 gamepad and you're not dependant on the clunky keyboard setup. This is the same fluid and accessible *PES* game you've grown to love over the years, but fleshed out with gameplay improvements and the 'Become a Legend' solo game mode. This gives you control over one midfield or striker on the pitch only, allowing you to apply an RPG-level of customisation to him before sending him onto the pitch in the hope that his (your) skills will be spotted by a scout.

It's a nice upgrade to the series, but the novelty will quickly wear off for old *PES* fans playing single-player, as there's not a lot of new content to shout about here.

Verdict

Good for your Friday night pizza and beer social or as a budget-buy afterthought.

6

Tech specs

»requirements
CPU P4 3GHz or Athlon 64 equivalent
RAM 2GB
GRAPHICS 256MB GeForce 6800, Radeon X1600 compatible

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WORLD WAR ONE

Wading in knee-deep WWI trench mud was probably more fun

Details **PRICE** £29.99 | **BEST PRICE** £17.98 (Amazon.co.uk) | **GENRE** Historical TBS | **DEVELOPER** Ascaron **PUBLISHER** Ascaron | **WEB** www.ageod.com

Leaping straight into *World War One* having never been acquainted with French developer AGEOD's other strategy titles, is much like leaping straight into WWI, into the Allied trenches, *Twelve Monkeys* style. Naked. It's completely overwhelming.

World War One is a historically accurate turn-based strategy with a highly detailed combat system. Playing one of the historical flashpoints of WWI from a list of scenarios, you choose a faction from the many involved in this convoluted war and wade into battle. Typical of the TBS genre, *World War One* consists of two main phases, a campaign map and a tactical screen where your battles are resolved. Basic units include infantry, cavalry and artillery, but also technologies that were introduced in this new era of warfare, like U-boats, Zeppelins and tanks will be made available once you've applied sufficient research in a specific area.

There's a huge map, masses of gameplay and replayablility to be had, but you have to have Jesus-like powers of clemency to get past *World War One*'s flaws to begin with: it's neither visually polished nor user-friendly. The interface is awfully frustrating with tiny buttons and miniscule drag-and-drop hotspots, and the text sometimes reads like a Babelfish translation. Most of all, it's a game you'd want a seriously comprehensive tutorial for, which you get... all 18 pages and 5,000 words of it.

If you're remarkably patient and a big fan of historical TBS games, you could well discover the depth to *World War One*. Otherwise, you'll find it totally inaccessible.

Ben Biggs

Verdict

A deep strategy title, but you'll need the patience of a saint to get into it.

3

Tech specs

»requirements
CPU 1.8GHz
RAM 2GB
GRAPHICS 256MB DX 9.0c compatible

In three words | **Tiger. Burning. Bright.**

WORLD WAR II BATTLE TANKS: T34 VS TIGER

It's not really a tank game, it's a tadger competition, you see...

Details **PRICE** £29.99 | **BEST PRICE** £22.50 (Amazon.co.uk) | **GENRE** Tank simulation **DEVELOPER** G5 Software | **PUBLISHER** Lighthouse | **WEB** www.lighthouse-interactive.com

Tech specs

»requirements
CPU 3GHz
RAM 2GB
GRAPHICS GeForce 6600

It's summer of 1944, and the Communist Russian and Nazi German armies are about to meet in Belarus and flatten the country – quite literally. As if the poor Belarusians hadn't endured enough hardship at the hands of Stalin, now the advancing Soviet Union armoured regiment is hot on the tracks of the retreating Werhmacht across plains and gently rolling hills: perfect tank country. We know the story ends with the Nazis caught between a Russian rock and an Allied hard place, but for this scenario we'd rather play the Germans.

We feel slightly dirty saying it, but for all the practicalities of the Russian T34 (mainly the easier gearing and simpler interface), the Tiger is sexy. It has a much more appealing name than the T34 and, unlike its cumbersome Russian counterpart, could be considered the military man's equivalent of a Dodge Challenger. In other words, the Nazis were compensating for their shortcomings in the trouser department – just take a look down the barrel from the driver position and you'll see what we're talking about.

Taking control of either tank is difficult at first, though. It's not so much that tanks don't drive like cars (these certainly don't), more that the control system is quite sophisticated and isn't very intuitive. It takes some fiddling around to get to grips with the many features, shifting your hands from one side of the keyboard to the other, and then to the mouse depending on what position you're in and whether you're driving or shooting. But once you've got the hang of it, *T34 vs Tiger* becomes a very compelling game.

It's tough, too, which is exactly what you'd hope from a simulation game. Tanks take their time when moving, aiming and shooting, plus strafing is definitely not an option. As tempting as it is to try, play this game like an FPS and you're doomed, but get inside the mindset of a tank driver and you'll find an incredibly strategic title. Animation, especially for infantry, can be remarkably binary, but the scale of destructibility surprised us, and you'll find yourself forgiving the dated visuals in the face of this engrossing simulation.

Verdict

Put that away, here's something much more fun to play with.

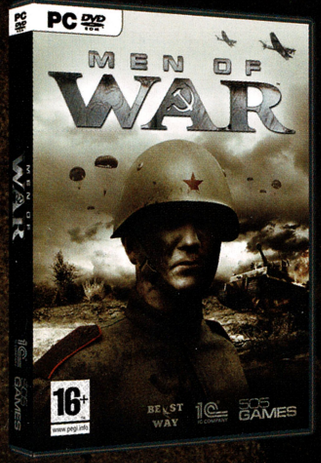
7

MEN OF WAR™

"Gloriously detailed RTS action with precision beyond anything else out there"
PC Gamer

Fight the war that changed the world...

- Battle through Russian, African, Ukrainian, Greek and German military operations, fought from the perspectives of the Russians, Germans and Allies.
- The 'Direct Control' feature allows you to take the fight beyond RTS boundaries.
- Highly detailed and destructible WWII environments faithfully recreated with cutting-edge graphics/physics engine.
- A variety of multiplayer modes, with up to 16 players supported!



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In three words **Time. To. Kill.**

TOTAL OVERDOSE

Car crime and flamboyant violence, meet Mexico

Details **PRICE** £9.99 | **BEST PRICE** £4.99 (Play.com) | **GENRE** Action | **DEVELOPER** Deadline Games | **PUBLISHER** Sold Out | **WEB** www.totaloverdose.com

Though you have the ability to nab peoples' cars from them and take control of the vast majority of vehicles you see, don't expect a great deal of pleasure from *Total Overdose*'s driving segments. A saloon car won't feel all that different from a crate-carrying truck. It is, at least, possible to open the door and drive the car with the majority of your body outside of it, before executing a dramatic departing jump.

Having dusted yourself down, you'll find that *Total Overdose* is more competent as a shooter. As was all the rage around the time of its release in 2005, you can launch yourself into a *Max Payne*-style bullet-time dive. This is actually among the least ridiculous of the moves Ramiro Cruz will perform in the course of the title. As you progress, you'll learn moves such as backflips from walls that you can whip out, ready to 'assist' you in mowing down the bad guys there to shoot at you and be shot.

Sadly, *Total Overdose* was never really much of a looker, and the clunky and garish visuals have failed to accrue any 'aged charm' in its budget reincarnation. Similarly, excessive as it is, the combat hasn't stood the test of time and has been well surpassed by modern rivals. On the upside, though, the title menu's Mexican hip-hop is truly a masterstroke.

Oliver Mather

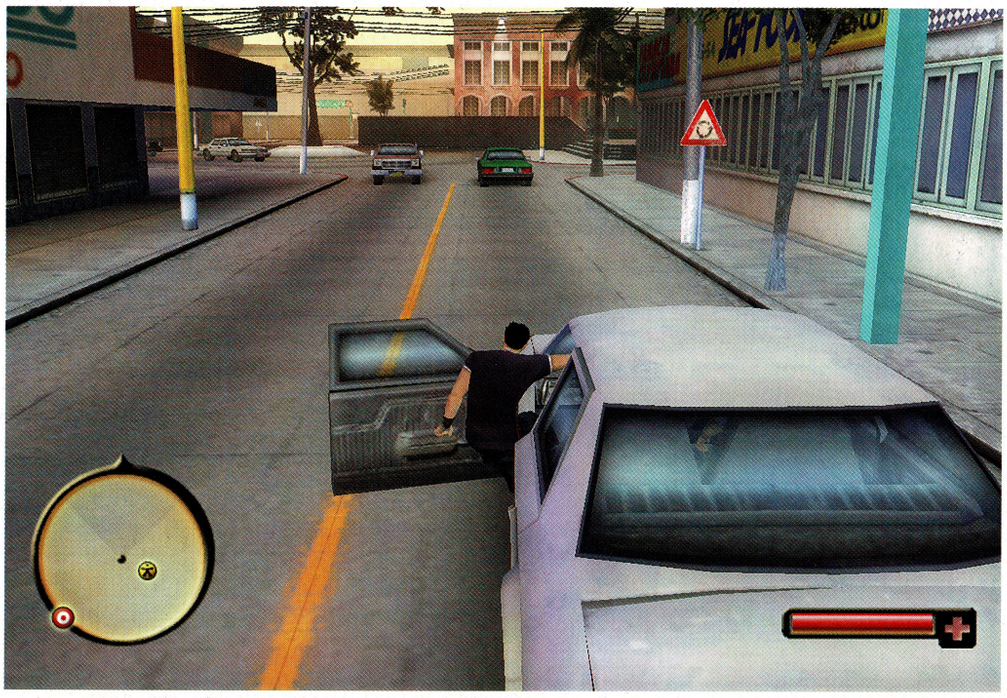
Verdict

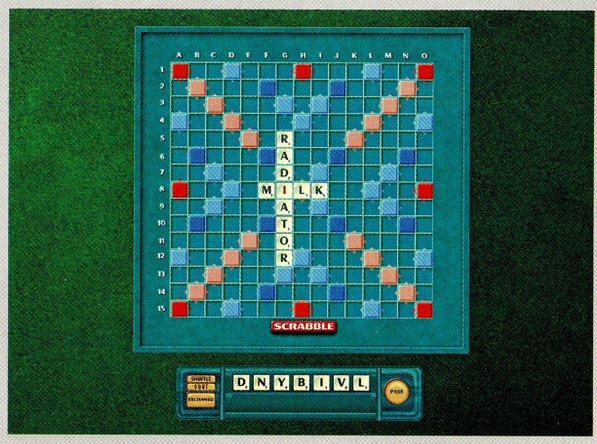
There are fun touches, but nothing that hasn't been done better elsewhere.

5

Tech specs

»requirements
CPU 1.5GHz
RAM 256MB
GRAPHICS DX 9.0





Tech specs

»requirements
CPU 1.2GHz
RAM 512MB (1GB Vista)
GRAPHICS DX 9.0

SCRABBLE

If you think your vocabulary is up to it...

Details **PRICE** £9.99
BEST PRICE £9.99 (Play.com)
GENRE Electronic board game
DEVELOPER Wizarbox | **PUBLISHER** Focus
WEB www.wizarbox.com

One of life's great pleasures is realising you can use your 'Q' on a triple-letter-score to create Scrabble cheat word, 'Qi'. The ensuing angry looks from your fellow players are truly something to behold. While Scrabble's electronic counterpart can't quite re-create such glares for you, there are some parallels.

You will, for instance, feel the frustration of having seven letters clearly incapable of forming any decent word while your opponent comes up with offerings you've never even seen or heard used. Indeed, AI opponents within the title will likely come up with some impressive words. We were particularly amused when 'Stuart', the easiest AI competitor and so-called 'limited wordsmith', kicked off with a score of 61, spelling 'radiator'. Should your pride not already have been thoroughly beaten into the ground by an artificial foe, it's even possible to pit yourself against genuine organic brains from across the world.

As well as the 'Classic' mode, it's also possible to play the 'Duplicate' variation of the game, where both yourself and your opponent share the same letters, with only the highest scoring word being added to the board. This, coupled with extra modes, such as having to find a word with a certain score from a set board configuration means there's plenty of meat for Scrabble fans, and perhaps some useful training for those who have yet to discover their inner champion.

Verdict

A faithful and comprehensive electronic re-creation of the popular word game.

7

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INDIE REVIEW

PROJECT AFTERMATH | LITTLE GIRL IN UNDERLAND
IJI | KAROSHI: SUICIDE SALARYMAN

In three words **Lock. Load. Conquer.**

The flamethrower is one of the more effective weapons

PROJECT AFTERMATH

Real-time strategy with added goop

Details **PRICE** $19.99 | **GENRE** Real-time strategy | **DEVELOPER** Games Faction
WEB www.gamesfaction.com/project-aftermath

When booting up *Project Aftermath*, you'd be forgiven for thinking it wasn't an indie effort. The visuals, sound effects, dialogue and cut-scenes are polished to professional standards, and the game itself is no slouch either. At first click it might appear to be a fairly standard squad-based RTS, but there are some interesting ideas here, the central one being a scoring system that is intimately tied to the difficulty level.

Before each mission you've got to equip your heroes with supporting troops, guns, armour, cybernetic enhancements and special abilities. Players can spend the game's currency ('goop') to fully load out their characters, or keep precious goop in reserve as score instead, giving them a better chance of obtaining a silver or gold medal for the mission. However, the less-equipped your troops are, the harder it is to finish the scenario.

Crucially, using special abilities such as resurrecting units and calling down an energy blast on the battlefield also drains goop, and should it drop too low the mission's deemed a failure. So huge battles often boil down to a balance of using powers and trying to maintain your score level, while micromanaging troops to attack those more vulnerable to their weapons (armour types are shown by a simple colour coding system). When you make the right decisions, it's a very satisfying RTS experience.

The micromanagement doesn't become overbearing as the battles are kept small scale. In fact, the only problems that crop up are related to the AI rather than the controls. Units can behave erratically – for example, sometimes when a squad is attacked, only half of them will return fire, while the others just stand around watching. Another bone of contention is the somewhat out of kilter weapon balance, with some disappointing upgrades towards the later levels.

While there are only ten missions, they're reasonably diverse, varying between all-out assaults and stealth sorties. And there's definitely replay value in trying to win those gold medals and possibly snagging a place on the online high score table.

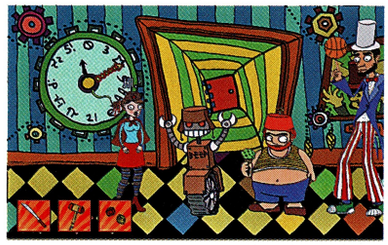
Verdict

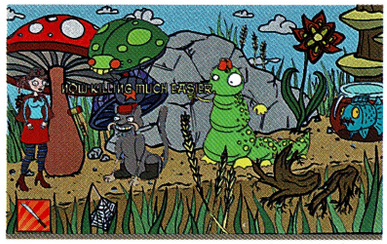
Project Aftermath is a professional-looking and thoughtfully designed RTS.

8

Tech specs

»**requirements**
CPU 2GHz
RAM 512MB
GRAPHICS 128MB





LITTLE GIRL IN UNDERLAND

Alice gets a de-makeover

Details **PRICE** Free
GENRE Adventure parody
DEVELOPER The Ivy
WEB www.livelyivy.com/?p=84

This game, created by Adventure Game Studio, is a mickey take of *American McGee's Alice* that was put together for a 'demake' competition. A demake is basically the opposite of a remake – it's taking a newer game and making it look like an older-generation title. *Alice*'s 3D graphics have been vanquished and replaced by 2D cartoon sketchings.

The game has been given a Soviet theme and the style of an Eastern European animation, so the Cheshire Cat is Russian and speaks in a very stilted accent. As for the object of the game – well, that should be obvious. To destroy capitalism, of course.

It soon becomes apparent that *Little Girl In Underland* isn't really a game, but more a short joke. The gameplay, such as it is, consists of picking up a few weapons and beating various characters over the head with them. It only takes ten minutes to complete, and most of the entertainment is gleaned from clicking on the characters and listening to their deadpan delivery of comedy lines. Some of which are quite amusing, some of which fall flat, and some of which are just a bit bizarre.

It's a shame that the developer couldn't have found some time to slot a few actual puzzles in here, because as it stands, there really isn't much to it. *Little Girl In Underland* does have something in the way of comic charm, but it's as much miss as it is hit.

Verdict

Little Girl In Underland is sporadically amusing, but very short-lived.

5

Tech specs

»**requirements**
CPU 400MHz
RAM 64MB
GRAPHICS 16MB

In three words **Kill. Or. Sneak.**

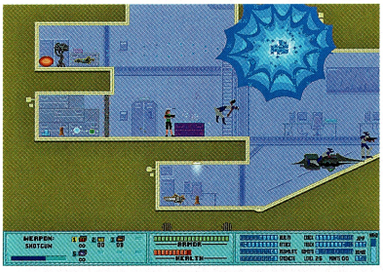
IJI

Iji, wiji, let's get... platformy?

Details **PRICE** Free | **GENRE** Platform
DEVELOPER Remar Games | **WEB** www.remar.se/daniel/iji

Iji is a cybernetic woman and Earth's last hope against an alien invasion that has flattened most of our poor planet. After she wakes up from a coma deep inside a military base, she's got to negotiate the game's various rooms, lay waste to the conquering scoundrels with a collection of weapons and level up her skills.

Well, that's one way of playing this action-oriented platformer – Iji's offensive abilities can be developed, giving her greater damage potential and skills that allow her to use the alien's exotic arsenal of guns. The alternative is to tread the path of stealth and cunning, bulking up her health and armour regeneration for survival, and auxiliary skills such as strength to kick down locked doors and find shortcuts. Interestingly, whichever path you choose changes the manner in which the otherworldly beings react to Iji, and the way in which the plot develops.



As you make your way further into the complex, it becomes clear that lots of cool touches are present in this platformer. The hacking skill has its own mini-game that enables you to break into hidden rooms or crates containing power-ups, there are extras such as vehicles to drive (albeit it in a very limited form), and the game gets very interesting when a second interstellar race is introduced. Iji then finds herself stuck in the middle of some pretty intense firefights, and clever folks can play the aliens off against each other with entertaining results.

The artificial intelligence of the enemies is quite impressive. For example, they'll attempt to duck under your rockets and will shoot and destroy crates you've taken cover behind to expose you. Later on, some of the more advanced foes use personal teleporters and all sorts of tricks to try to finish you off.

Iji may be a little messy and tired on the visual front, but make no mistake, it's a polished gem of a platformer. The fact that it's freeware makes it all the more tempting.

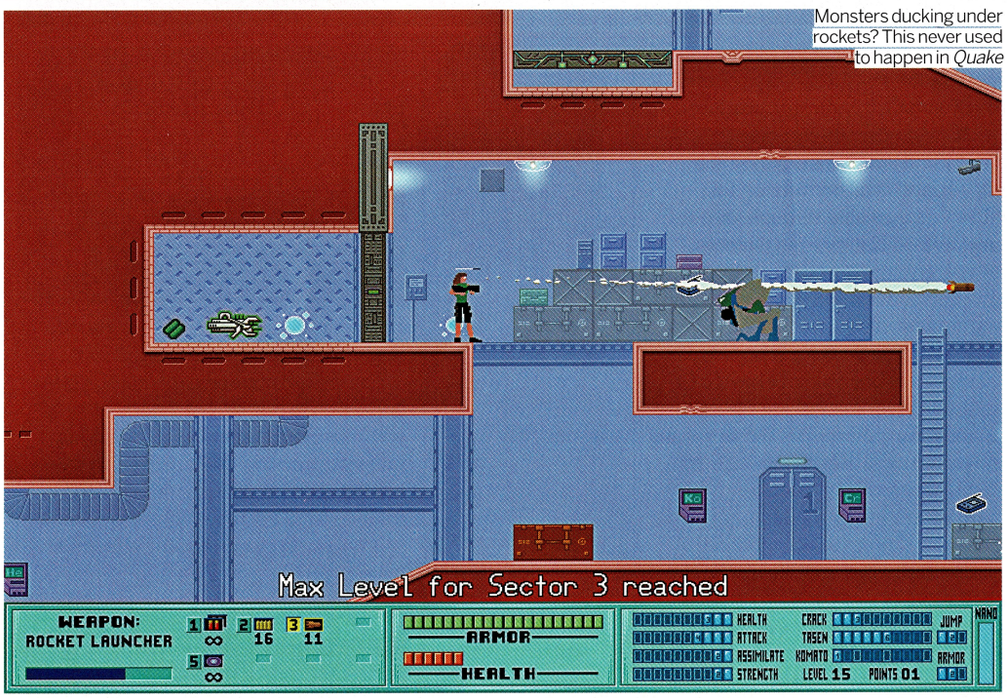
Verdict

A clever platformer with a surprising amount of depth, and a freebie at that.

7

Tech specs

»requirements
CPU 1GHz
RAM 256MB
GRAPHICS 32MB



Monsters ducking under rockets? This never used to happen in *Quake*

KAROSHI: SUICIDE SALARYMAN

Tech specs

»requirements
CPU 400MHz
RAM 64MB
GRAPHICS 16MB

End the nine-to-five grind, over and over

Details **PRICE** Free | **GENRE** Platform puzzle | **DEVELOPER** Karoshi
WEB tinyurl.com/karoshigame

This is a browser-based platforming puzzler with a definite difference – the idea is to die. Throughout the game's 50 levels you have to take a poor, depressed middle manager and impale him on spikes, electrocute him on live wires and shoot him in the head.

Karoshi tests both your jumping dexterity and puzzle-solving prowess, although it's mainly the latter. The controls are simple (left, right, jump and fire), but the puzzles involve a fair bit of thinking ahead. It's all about pushing crates, standing on switches, and then realising you shouldn't have shoved that box onto that platform because now you can't get to it without flicking the lever that turns the electric floor off, which means you can't kill yourself on it.

The levels are quite well balanced in terms of difficulty, with some more exacting ones mixed in fairly evenly with some easier affairs. Some of the toughest screens to crack, however, are those that look completely straightforward at first sight. Finishing these generally involves discovering some previously unknown rule about the game, such as the fact that bullets wrap around the edges of the screen.

There's the odd niggle (attempting to aim your gun while flying through the air can be a frustrating process) and it all gets a bit daft towards the end. However, *Karoshi* is enjoyable enough, and worryingly cute considering that it's all about suicide. It'll only last you an hour or perhaps two, but, hey, it's a free lunch break's worth of entertainment.

Darren Allen

Verdict

A solid platformer/puzzler that is well worth firing up in your browser.

7

MOD REPORT

THE BEST MODS & TOTAL CONVERSIONS FOR THE GREATEST GAMES

Work in progress

CURSE

Mod details

GAME Half-Life 2
WEB www.moddb.com/mods/curse1

This total conversion of *Half-Life 2* has been percolating nicely, with an intended Q1 2009 release date. But we felt it was worth a mention this month after the release of some beautifully stylistic teaser media.

The game is set in an Egyptian necropolis (complete with mummies) at the turn of the 19th Century. To garner a little extra exposure as the mod's development heats up, the team has released a set of images and media taken from the December issue of the fictional Egypt Star newspaper, circa 1801.

The enchanting Georgian-style 'lithography' has piqued significant interest in the mod, so we'll certainly be keeping a close eye on *Curse*.

BATTLE PAINT 2

Mod details

GAME Battlefield 2142
WEB bpaint.supworld.net

This is what we love about mods – they're not constrained by management or focus groups. Any team that puts together an FPS that's essentially Teletubbies versus Care Bears using paint guns gets our vote, so swing by the mod's official page and take a look at the work in progress videos.

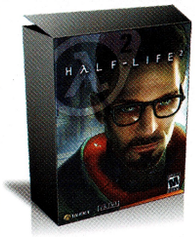
Despite the spoof nature of such a mod, it still looks set to be a very decent shooter, and coupled with the hilarious, mischievous lampooning of two beloved children's assets, *Battle Paint 2* should be one hell of a brightly coloured riot.

INSURGENCY ON STEAM

We've been keeping a close eye on the rumours that Valve intended to open up the Steam distribution network to a select few mods, and it seems things are finally underway. *Insurgency*, the infantry-based total conversion for *Half-Life 2*, is available through gamers' Steampowered clients from October.

"As a part of our continuing efforts to support the mod community, we will begin hosting selected mods directly on Steam," the Valve webpage explains. "The first five mods to ship on Steam will be *Age Of Chivalry*, *D.I.P.R.I.P.*, *Insurgency*, *Synergy* and *Zombie Panic*. As always, owners of any source game will be able to download and play all of these mods for free."

The major benefit for modders and gamers is the simplicity of distribution, installation and updating of the mods. The online distribution system is also likely to encourage gamers who've never really jumped into the modification arena to give these incredible free games a try – further expanding the client base for community-made games and encouraging growth.



These Steampowered mods will appear in the 'My Games' list just like any other title, and will receive automatic updates along with stats tracking. "We're excited to see mod developers get wider recognition for the hard work they have done," says Valve. "We hope to support more mod teams in the future."

Mod details

GAME Half-Life 2
WEB www.insmod.net

NEW RELEASES! PLAYABLE CODE

PORTAL PRELUDE

Being the surprise hit of the *Orange Box* compilation, it's easy to get excited about any *Portal* news, let alone a whole new addition to its lineage. *Portal Prelude* was a mod released on the first birthday of *The Orange Box* (10 October 2008), and takes place before the aperture-hopping antics of the original game.

The game is set before the sweet-talking GlaDOS system was activated, and test subjects were still monitored by Aperture Science employees. However, GlaDOS is about to be brought online to relieve the burden of these beleaguered employees, and anyone who played the original through to the end will undoubtedly have picked up a couple of clues as to why the laboratory wound up being deserted. This expansion of the storyline naturally makes *Portal Prelude* more than just another map pack. **www.portalprelude.com**

BATTLE OF THE BULGE

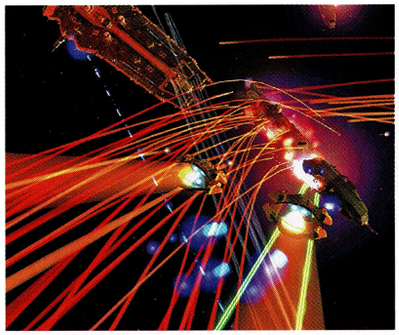
Version 2.0 of this fantastic recreation of the German attack on US-held territory in Luxembourg and Belgium has now been released, featuring a host of improvements including a far more realistic approach to *Company Of Heroes*' 'capture the flag' gameplay.

Now, instead of capturing a flag, forces possess a territory through sheer weight of numbers – winning the area by tipping the balance of power in a very literal way. Tank combat has also been given a remarkable historical accuracy, with turret rotation times and range of visibility based on the actual statistics of the real-life machines. **botb.rtscentral.net**

THE NAMELESS MOD

Over seven years in development, this massive *Deus Ex* mod seems to finally be drawing close to a full release – currently slated for Q1 2009.

The Nameless Mod points a comical finger at forum communities, as it tells the tale of abducted moderators in a vast and sprawling world dominated by the worship of *Deus Ex*. With 59 levels, training missions, over nine hours of recorded voice acting, more than 100 new characters and an estimated 30 hours of gameplay currently shoehorned into this gigantic add-on, it looks set to break all previous expectations of the kind of scope a mod can achieve. **thenamelessmod.com**

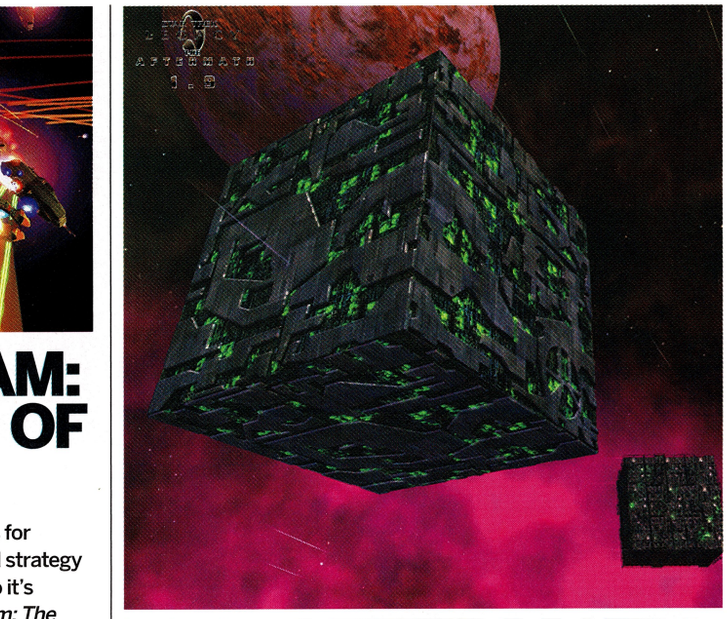


SLIPSTREAM: THE PRICE OF FREEDOM

We haven't seen too many mods for Sierra's 2003 space combat and strategy game, *Homeworld 2*, recently, so it's interesting to hear the *Slipstream: The Price Of Freedom* mod has now been released in its final version.

Slipstream 2.0 features a whole new menu system and is able to support HD graphics up to 1600x1200. It's also available for both Windows and Mac (either version will work on the PC version, however), and lots of custom maps, fleets, weapons and ship-to-ship combat techniques really freshen up this excellent, yet aging, source game.

Mod details
GAME Homeworld 2
WEB subreality.invisionplus.net



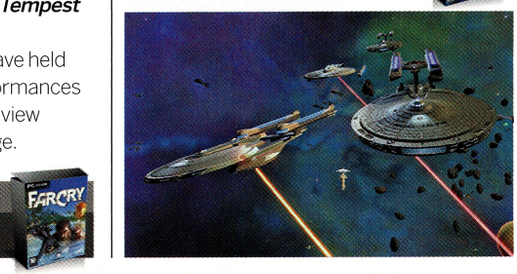
THE AFTERMATH

As with the *Deception* mod for *The Witcher*, *The Aftermath* makes a commendable effort to not only provide a new gaming experience for jaded *Star Trek: Legacy* players, but provide the primordial base for newcomers to begin working on their own adaptations.

The mod aspect of *The Aftermath* increases the game's AI, adds new maps and scenarios and provides a completely redesigned interface throughout.

The most significant aspect is the tutorial, however, which encourages people new to the modding arena to have a go at designing their own missions, maps and gameplay. Any new developments can then be uploaded and added to the increasingly prolific catalogue of famous *Star Trek* encounters.

Mod details
GAME Star Trek: Legacy **WEB** theaftermathmod.star-trek-games.com



MOVIE BATTLES II

The first *Star Wars Movie Battles* mod for *Jedi Outcast* has now migrated to *Jedi Academy*, bringing all your favourite *Star Wars* fights together in grand style. *Movie Battles II* is a class-based, team-orientated, multiplayer total conversion focusing on team play battles between Jedi and Sith, droids and clones and the Rebellion and the Empire.

The saga's iconic weaponry has been upgraded and integrated, enabling gamers to make full and dynamic use of Lightsabers, arc rifles and everything else necessary to properly recreate the exhilarating battles from *Episode One* to *Six*.

Mod details
GAME Star Wars: Jedi Academy
WEB www.moviebattles.com

DECEPTION

As the new game has now been released, it's great to see the mod community has also turned its attention to the popular Eastern European fantasy horror RPG, *The Witcher*. The game's first community adventure, *Deception*, is now available as the inaugural part of REDFlame's *Shards Of Destiny* add-on.

Providing new areas to the town of Carreas, a three-hour storyline following Geralt as he attempts to save Dandelion from the jaws of justice and the introduction of throwing knives to the *Witcher*'s arsenal, this looks like a great way to revitalise the game. Each part of the series will also be modular in release, allowing others in the community to use the source code to build their own *Witcher* mods.

Mod details
GAME The Witcher
WEB www.witchermod.com

STURMMOD

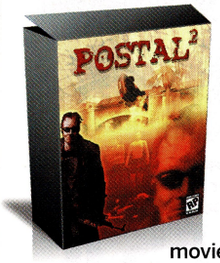
This fascinating mod is part of a German group's media arts production, which, instead of providing us with the usual revamped gameplay of a source game, aims to re-create the places and events described in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* into an interactive arena.

The group, Projekt A.R.I.E.L., have held some superbly dynamic live performances featuring the mod, which you can view videos of at their **moddb.com** page.

Mod details
GAME Far Cry
WEB moddb.com/mods/stefan-khler

THE ESSENTIAL... POSTAL 2

VIOLATING YOUR LETTERBOX



» **RELEASED** April 2003
» **DEVELOPER** Running With Scissors
» **PUBLISHER** Whiptail Interactive
» **GENRE**:First-person shooter
» **LATEST PATCH** 1337
» **WEB** www.postal2.com

Now the official movie is out, opinions on *Postal* as an entertainment avenue are even more polarised. Meeting with joint reactions of detest and love – with almost nothing in between – seems quite fitting for the big screen adaptation, considering that's the response the game has always seen.

While the original game wasn't really coded for modification, the sequel (and its expansions in particular) has opened up the salacious world of the Postal Dude and the twisted town of Paradise he lives in. But the coarsely divided attitude toward the deliberately controversial content of Postal has made for a rather unique trend in the mod community.

Whereas most source games see mods designed to take their mechanics and craft a whole new experience, *Postal 2* mods rarely diverge much from the original blood-splattered material. This isn't because modders are unable to put the game's engine to more dynamic use, of course. It's that people who are drawn toward the further expansion of a game like *Postal 2* are true believers and don't want to fiddle too much with what they see as the perfect formula. They're fully fledged Dudes, eager to present their own interpretation of Paradise in all its debauched, hyper-violent glory. And we salute them for it.

SHARE THE PAIN

gopostal.com/postal2

Okay, not so much an application as a revamp of the original release, *Postal 2: Share The Pain* is the definitive version, which not only introduced multiplayer, but refined the game considerably. Many mods rely on this version being installed, so make sure your shotgun's loaded with *Share The Pain*.

A WEEK IN PARADISE

One of the problems many *Postal* dudes had with the *Apocalypse Weekend* add-on was the linear approach it took. This divergence from the free-roaming gameplay people had previously enjoyed put a bit of a dampener on the cool new weapons, such as the boomerang machete, sledgehammer and scythe. Neither could these awesome new weapons of minor destruction be taken back to the core game, so the add-on struggled to live up to its potential.

Fortunately, the *Week In Paradise* mod came along and unlocked the *Apocalypse Weekend* add-on exactly as the depraved players wanted. A police radio is made available for you to get one step ahead of the filth, a bucket full of extra blood and gore hits the streets and the weapons and gameplay can now be transported to the original game.

This mod – when combined with the right add-ons – pretty much takes the official *Postal 2* system to the peak of its nefarious and sick gameplay, so if you loved the game to begin with, do yourself a favour and go for *A Week In Paradise*.

Mod details
WEB www.moddb.com/mods/awp-a-week-in-paradise **SIZE** 182.43MB | **VERSION** Full

A VERY POSTAL CHRISTMAS

It might be a blood-soaked affair, but it's Christmas even in Paradise, and *A Very Postal Christmas* sets the Dude off on his seasonal shopping (and killing) spree.

Getting into the spirit requires booze, so Postal Dude must first find himself a batch of the finest eggnog to swill, and pick up a suitable pressie for Uncle Dave while he's painting the town dark red. A typically sadistic and riotous farce of errands and seasonal violence ensues as only the residents of Paradise know how.

Such was the success of *A Very Postal Christmas*, the mod was actually included in last year's tenth anniversary compilation re-release, *Postal X*. Your collection isn't complete without it.

Mod details
WEB www.moddb.com/mods/awp-a-week-in-paradise **SIZE** 182.43MB | **VERSION** Full

NOTHING-D

Chances are an option like this would have been a little too much for PCs back when *Postal 2* was first released. But the speed at which gaming technology moves apparently means it's not such a chore these days.

Nothing-D is a simple mod, but one that makes a surprising difference to the overall gameplay. Once installed, it prevents any 'manipulated' aspects of *Postal 2* from disappearing. That includes dead bodies, blood, debris, urine – everything Postal Dude leaves his mark upon, really.

A small adjustment, and presumably one originally implemented to relieve strain on the system, but wallowing in the wake of your own destruction as this mod allows, adds an impressive and chaotic dimension to an already frenzied game.

Mod details
Web moddb.com/mods/nothing-d-mod
SIZE 260KB | VERSION Full

SEVERANCE

It might sound a bit sick (this is a *Postal 2* mod, after all), but *Severance* is a surprisingly vital addition to the Dude's world, which makes the game's characters fly limb from limb when shot. Each joint in a character's body (dead or alive) is now severable; complete with blood spurts from the stump.

But it's not all about the gore. *Severance* adds some excellent physics to the action that really improve the visuals of *Postal 2*. Shoot someone in the head and they fly backwards – shoot them in the leg and they fall forwards. Different guns have different effects, so a pistol might sever a head, while a shotgun completely splatters it.

It's pretty sick, but the game looks a damn sight more entertaining for it.

Mod details
Web tinyurl.com/severancemod
SIZE 809KB | VERSION Full

NEXT MONTH
Rome: Total War mods come under the TPCG spotlight.

DAMAGE MOD

If, like many others, you feel there's a serious gap in *Postal 2*'s gameplay that prevents you from hacking off a dead body's head with a shovel and kicking it around, you need *Damage Mod*.

While this mod isn't entirely different from *Severance*, its focus is more on the weapons than the characters (though it certainly goes out of its way to make a mess of them). It makes headshots possible from any direction using the pistol and machine gun, while also tweaking the enemy's accuracy and the force of explosions.

All fairly small adjustments, but *Damage Mod* is one of those add-ons that brings *Postal 2* a little closer to current gaming expectations, and is well worth installing.

Mod details
WEB tinyurl.com/damagemod
SIZE 973KB | VERSION Full

ETERNAL DAMNATION

***Eternal Damnation* is one of the few *Postal 2* mods to actually attempt a conversion; bringing in a new main character and a considerably different gameplay style and storyline.**

This story picks up with a mental patient protagonist breaking out of an overrun asylum to face a world full of rampaging zombies and brutal, warped survivors. It takes what we've seen as bad taste jokes in *Postal 2* and twists them, ever so slightly, into the shape of an action-packed zombie horror. The sadistic range of weaponry and destructible nature of *Postal 2*'s weird characters actually translates superbly to a zombie game, and essentially comes preloaded with the required gore and loose body parts such a theme demands.

While such diversity is celebrated in most mods, the cult nature of *Postal 2* has meant that *Eternal Damnation* is feeding an even smaller niche, since *Postal* dudes love the original for its balls-out humour and taboo themes. But packaging *Eternal Damnation* up with your *Postal 2* collection is no bad thing (and, indeed, this mod was included in the official *Fudge Pack* compilation) as a decent sideline to the typical Paradise-based canon.

Recommended for all *Postal 2* fans who also love a bit of zombie blasting.

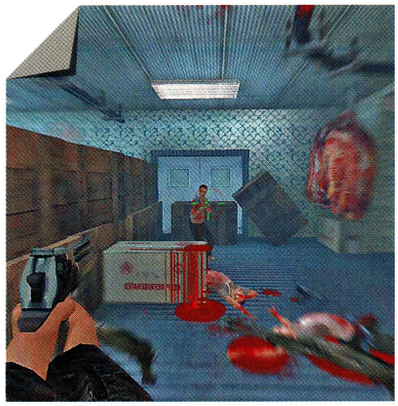
Mod details
WEB moddb.com/mods/eternal-damnation
SIZE 22.1149.80MB | VERSION Full

BULLET TIME

This small but vital mod is a favourite among *Postal* dudes, as it harnesses one of the prime factors of the *Max Payne* games and injects it directly into *Postal 2*'s veins.

As the name suggests, this mod adds the 'bullet time' function to your *Postal 2* game – enabling you to slow the passage of time for a few crucial seconds as you continue to take shots at normal speed.

Bullet Time does require a small amount of tinkering in the game's config file to allocate which button will be used to activate it, but nothing serious enough to scare away any real dudes. And it's definitely worth the effort.



Mod details
WEB www.moddb.com/mods/awp-a-week-in-paradise SIZE 182.43MB | VERSION Full

The future of games websites

not next week

not tomorrow

NOW Gamer.com

Winter 2008

NOW registering

Go to NowGamer.com to register your details and be one of the first members to join the site

World Of Warcraft :: 7Million :: LOTRO: Mines Of Moria

MMO WORLDS

Your guide to the massive online universe

Issue 14 » 5 gold

BlizzCon 2008

Blizzard, babes and bikini armour! The MMO event of the year in full...

PAGE 84 MMO DIRECTORY
» Every MMO listed for your convenience

SPAWN POINT
PAGE 76
» 7Million MMO aims high
» Dofus reaches 10 million players worldwide

SPAWN POINT

MMO WORLDS NEWS

NEWS, VIEWS AND CURRENT EVENTS FROM THE WORLDS OF MMO

IN THIS ISSUE

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077 » **Dofus**
078 » **Why you should play** Zu Online
078 » **This month in...**
079 » **Guild advice**
079 » **Events calendar** December – January

Welcome

In this issue we take a look at *7Million*, an upcoming crime-based MMO with a twist that has surprised even us, and elsewhere we've got the news on ghost training in *Eve Online* and why developer CCP is definitely doing away with it. Should *Eve* players be able to train skills even on lapsed subscriptions, or do they have to pay for their training time? Tell us your opinions on the TPCG forums. Guild Advice this month deals with the phenomenon of meta-gaming – remember, keep your friends close, and your enemies closer. Plus there's all the news and views from your favourite online worlds.

OMFG!

Producer Jan Wagner reckons that *7Million* will 'enable MMO enthusiasts to finally introduce their loved ones to the game without resulting in a look of incredulity and pity.' Cheers, then...

PST! WHISPERS FROM MMO WORLDS

RICHARD GARRIOTT BLASTS OFF

At the time of going to press, *Tabula Rasa*'s celebrity developer Richard Garriott had become the latest space tourist to blast off to the International Space Station – along with the digitised DNA of 'select players'…

FINAL FANTASY TIDAL TALISMAN

MMO players can wear their heart on their sleeve, or rather around their necks, with the release of the Final Fantasy Tidal Talisman. The unisex bauble retails for £24.

LORDS OF EVIL OPEN BETA

Lords Of Evil, the US-developed web-based MMO, has entered open beta. Players of the closed beta will be able to keep all of the items and other goodies they previously acquired in the game.

SHOT ONLINE WINNER

Golfing MMO *Shot Online* recently announced the winners of its United Cup Tournament. Held at the game's Pearl Green Island course, the tournament saw Team USA take victory.

Class **Crime**

7Million

Take me down to the Paradise City…

Seven million is a lucky number for MMO developers (just ask Blizzard). It's also the name of a new MMO currently in development by Cliffhanger Productions, Team Vienna and Deep Silver/Koch Media. It's going to be fully 3D, free to play and there are no elves, superheroes or space marines to be seen.

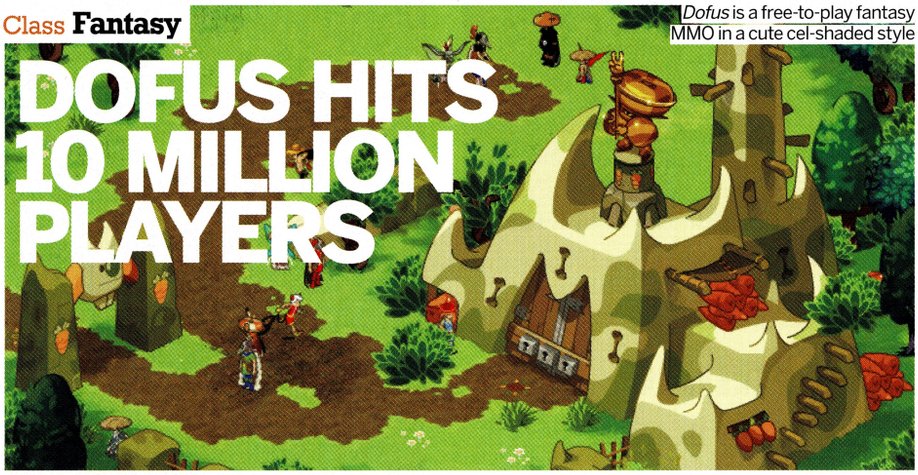
Set in the fictional Paradise City, *7Million* is based around crime and the consequences of crime. No, we're not talking punishment, we're talking money. Lots and lots of lovely money. There's little firm information on the overarching plot and where the not-so-cryptic title comes into it, but given the distinctly Vegas feel of the screenshots and the details that are slowly (seven at a time, in fact) trickling out onto the game's website, we're betting that the aim of the game is for larcenists to rack up as much filthy lucre as they can. So is it a case of *Grand Theft MMO*? Sadly not. One of the things that immediately stands out from the sparse dev blog entries about the game itself is producer Jan Wagner's comment that "We created [a] means to have action and suspense without killing or shooting." Wait, what? Hold on just a second there – it's a game about criminals, set in some rich but seedy vice city and nobody gets their brains blown out? The developer asks "Why have people kill each other if we can achieve friendly competition by less violent means?"

It's an interesting point. We're used to indie free-to-plays and their left-field ideas here at **TPCG**, but even we're wondering just how the developers of *7Million* are going to pull that one off.

You can sign up for the closed beta at www.7million.com

Class **Fantasy**

DOFUS HITS 10 MILLION PLAYERS



Dofus is a free-to-play fantasy MMO in a cute cel-shaded style

It's another 'Watch out WOW' moment…

Free-to-play *Dofus* has become the latest MMO to rack up a potentially Blizzard-bothering number of players. 10 million unique users have played the cutesy isometric game, which boasts 1.5 million dedicated subscribers. Developer Ankama cites its anime stylings as the reason for the game's appeal.

The game has just gained a new server in its native France, while the English language version of the game, released in 2005, has attracted players from as far afield as the UK, US, Canada and South America. German, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese versions followed, and now *Dofus* is played in over 150 countries worldwide. The game's sequel, Wakfu, set 1,000 years after the events of *Dofus*, is currently in closed beta and has been tentatively slated for release sometime in 2009.

Class **Sci-fi**

Eve Online switches off ghost training

No more set-and-forget skills building

Top level skills take a really, really long time to learn in *Eve Online*. Some Level 5 skills can take well over a month of training time to complete – and that's not counting the four levels you put in beforehand. Traditionally, hardcore *Eve Online* players got around this by creating specialised alts: logging them in to start or switch training and then leaving them inactive. The skills would still be trained even if a subscription lapsed for a few months, making this a cheap and cheerful way of levelling up while still being able to fully enjoy other aspects of the game. Now the Icelandic financial crash is evidently biting developer CCP hard, because it's removed this feature. So is it driving players away? Hell no – they're just getting babysitters instead. 'Wanted, part-time carer for titan pilot. Must be CRB checked and able to cope with alliance chucking toys out of pram…'

Games industry

Peter Jarvis joins True Games

Ex-EA, NCsoft CIO heads up MMO team

Industry veteran Peter Jarvis has joined the ranks of True Games Interactive as chief technology officer, heading up the company's push into the MMO space. A former EA employee and most recently vice president and chief information officer at NCsoft, he's joined the relatively new company with a brief to spearhead its rollout of free-to-play MMO games. One of these is being developed in partnership with Petroglyph, the developer that brought you *Star Wars: Empire At War* and *Star Wars: Universe At War*. "With the development of our own advanced technology platform and the creation and launch of several multi-million dollar titles on the horizon, our technology must be state of the art," said Jeff Lujan, chairman of True Games Interactive. "The position of CTO is arguably the most important role in accomplishing our strategic goals and snagging Peter is nothing short of a coup."

OMFG!

Zu Online is based in the ancient Chinese tradition of wuxia; a literary genre that blends the idea of the wandering warrior with the martial and spiritual traditions of kung fu. Banned under Communist party rules for most of the 20th Century, it's now enjoying a revival.

Zu Online is a fantasy free-to-play game set in mythical China that revolves around the idea of the wandering warrior.

WHY YOU SHOULD PLAY...

Zu Online

When you're in a Zu, what do you do?

We have an ongoing fascination with *Zu Online*. It's like coming home from school on a Friday evening and watching *Monkey*. This Chinese MMO is so badly dubbed that you really do wonder if the developer is doing it on purpose. If there's a double entendre to be exploited or a disjointed phrase full of comedy value, they're in there. But that's not all – in its way, this cel-shaded 3D free-to-play is packed with features.

Take the mansion system. In no other game can you blag a guildhall simply because it's unoccupied. Not only that, but you can use said mansion to generate city gates, vehicles, pet areas and stores. And as everyone can hop on their swords and fly in *Zu Online* (yes, really), you can also designate a flying route to your mansion, with guardian deities and watch dogs to keep the riffraff out. Stick that in your hobbit hole, *LOTRO*.

Then there are the pets themselves, and these are one of our particular fascinations. You can use them as mounts to get you around the world of *Zu Online*, and as battle assistants to fight for you in combat. They start off small and incredibly cute (think *Pokémon* but awesome) and evolve into grown-up Jade Tortoises, Plume Rocs, Narwhals and the bizarrely named Snowy Sophist among others (our favourite is the Green Fungus Horse – don't ask). You have to feed them, walk them and love them, though, or they'll fade away and die, and they're no great shakes in combat when confronted with angry mobs and large spawns. There's a raft of sometimes baffling stats on your pet, all of which will tell you the particular, uniquely tailored advantages it will give you – assuming you can be bothered to figure out what it all means.

And then, of course, there is the whole flying on a sword thing. It's cool in that whole *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* way – ridiculous, pompous and not even half as elegant as you think it should be, but infinitely cool nonetheless.

THIS MONTH IN...

A look back at the past month's events in the big five

WORLD OF WARCRAFT

It was a busy month for Azeroth – the much-anticipated expansion *Wrath Of The Lich King* was released worldwide, while in-game the Christmassy Feast of Winterveil was celebrated, and the Darkmoon Faire came to Elwynn.

The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar

Yuletide was celebrated in Middle-earth with Yuletide trees in towns and gardens, and festive quests throughout the more welcoming areas of Middle-earth such as the Shire, Bree and Rivendell.

WARHAMMER ONLINE: AGE OF RECKONING

WAR publisher EA recently announced that *Warhammer Online: Age Of Reckoning* had racked up three quarters of a million players by October 2008 – and it's still growing. "Thanks to our players, the war between the Realms continues to escalate at an incredible pace," said Mark Jacobs, co-founder and general manager of Mythic Entertainment, the game's developer.

EVE ONLINE

Unhappy with high instances of 'suicide ganking' in *Eve*, where large groups of players in small, cheap ships take on a single pilot, usually in a much larger and more expensive ship, CCP implemented some new standings ratings just in time for the Fan Fest.

AGE OF CONAN: HYBORIAN ADVENTURES

A new producer and director was brought onto the *Age Of Conan* team to replace previous incumbent Gaute Godager. Craig Morrison previously headed up Funcom's ageing *Anarchy Online* title, where he built up a reputation for giving gamers what they wanted.

TPCG's MMO expert April Madden is in your account, sharding your purples. If you had to check, she wins all your internets.

Guild Master

Each month MMO Worlds brings you advice on running the perfect guild

Bases are so Nineties. In-game territory? Why, how turn-based strategy! This is the 21st Century. These days, it's all about the meta-gaming. Forget bases. All your Facebook are belong to us.

If you've been living in a closed instance for the last couple of months, meta-gaming is the dark art of taking the game out of the sandbox universe. You see it in games that are rife with player politicking, like *Eve Online*. (*Eve* players, if you don't think you're involved in meta-gaming, kindly check your Top Eight for potential spies before you write me a florid, angry fanboy missive about it. You'll thank me later.) There are bad and even downright illegal aspects of meta-gaming, like log-in thefts and forum hacking. The idea is to insert a spy into your guild so that they can report back on all your activities or even steer them in the direction your enemies would prefer them to go. In meta-gaming, the battlefield is the entire internet – forums, blogs, social networking sites. It's even happening in real life. It's not so much about the territory you command or the items you hold, as the overall social standing of your guild; the perception of you as 'winners'.

It's only a short and postmodern step to meta-meta-gaming, which I, in my infinite wisdom, am declaring to be the MMO zeitgeist of 2009. But I could be doing that ironically.

PST!

PARTY ON!

Comedy free-to-play fantasy MMO *Dungeon Party* is due for release in the first quarter of 2009. Developed by Cyanide Studios, the game is a cartoon-styled alternative to *Dungeon Runners*, boasting a range of customisable character classes.

MY HORSE CLUB

We can barely contain our excitement. Koch Media has announced the release of *My Horse Club*, a 3D online MMO (with trading cards!) that claims to be 'the most realistic online horse simulation game'. Well, that's our copy of *My Horse And Me* off to the glue factory, then...

DRAGONICA COMES TO EUROPE

GPotato's popular 3D side-scrolling fantasy free-to-play is coming to Europe in the first quarter of 2009. Hugely popular in Korea, the game offers players their own mounts, houses and even a 'marriage system' for players.

The big five Events calendar

What's happening in your world?

DEC

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

JAN

			1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30	31	

WORLD OF WARCRAFT

New Year

31 DEC 08 – 1 JAN 09

What: Azeroth's celebration of the New Year sees fireworks and booze abound as Horde and Alliance alike celebrate the end of one year and the beginning of the next.

Where: Look out for New Year's celebrations throughout Azeroth as the year turns – the largest towns will boast the most impressive displays and the biggest crowds.

AGE OF CONAN

Murder points

TBA

What: New producer and game director Craig Morrison has started his *AOC* tenure with a bang in this attempt to reduce the rampant spawn camping and ganking in the game. Higher-level players who engage lower-level ones in PvP will now accrue 'Murder Points', which will affect how NPCs treat you and what items and missions you can pick up.

Where: At the time of going to press, this feature had been implemented on the game's test server with no confirmed roll-out date across all servers.

LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE

Introduction of the Warden

18 NOVEMBER 2008

What: This new character class uses spears and javelins for melee and ranged attacks, and is tasked with guarding the settlements of Middle-earth from Sauron's marauders. It became available in the *Mines Of Moria* expansion.

Where: Wardens are guardian character types but are also pretty effective tanks. While they're designed primarily to guard settlements, they're perfectly capable of taking the fight to the enemy on the borders of Mordor.

WARHAMMER ONLINE

Black Guard and Knight reintroduced

DECEMBER 2008

What: Two classes from the beta are being reintroduced to the game. The Dark Elf Black Guard and the Empire Knight of the Blazing Sun class are both Tank classes. Meanwhile, the game's RvR system is being tweaked during the same update.

Where: You'll be able to play as a Black Guard by creating a new Dark Elf character, starting in the Blighted Isles, while if you want to play as a Knight you'll need to start a new Empire character.

EVE ONLINE

Quantum Rise expansion

TBC

What: The ninth free expansion to the *Eve* universe, entitled *Quantum Rise*, promises to radically rebuild industrial ships such as haulers and mining ships and introduces a new class of industrial capital ship called the Orca, as well as expanding on the Trinity graphics system and corporation medals.

Where: A date is yet to be confirmed at the time of going to press for the roll-out of *Quantum Rise*, but it should trickle out across the *Eve* sandbox universe with notable releases like the Orca showing up first.

BLIZZCON 2008

A massively popular game, cosplay and a 15,000-strong crowd: this isn't Major League Baseball, either

This year's BlizzCon was once again held at the Anaheim Convention Center in California, right across the street from Disneyland. It not only marked the event's third year, but also the biggest yet, as attendance numbered over 15,000 people. It seems strange that an event showcasing only three games (one of which is an expansion pack, and the other two a long time away from release) should outperform the recent E for All event held in neighbouring Los Angeles, which showed off dozens upon dozens of the hottest upcoming multiplatform releases. But that is a testament to the impressive and fearsomely loyal fan base Blizzard and its quality-over-quantity approach has established over the years.

The games were, of course, the biggest attraction, with attendees waiting in amusement park-esque lines for hours just to get 20 minutes worth of hands-on time with each title. The two BlizzCon gift shops sported similarly daunting lines, all just to buy exclusive Blizzard-branded apparel, figurines, and admittedly cool tin lunchboxes. Most of the worthwhile items found in the infamous BlizzCon goodie bags could also be purchased here, which we had to do as our swag collection was stolen (unfortunately, our uber-rare polar bear mounts are seemingly lost forever).

A first for the event was a live, international telecast held by DirecTV and hosted by the Girls Entertainment Network founder, Becky Young. Aside from extensive interviews, the televised programming also included coverage of the several panels where developers and producers each discussed various aspects of the company's games, such as visual design, CG cinematics and expanding the lore of its fantasy worlds.

To celebrate Blizzard's past, the Retro Arcade was equipped with its older console and PC games, including everything from *Rock N' Roll Racing* on the SNES to *Warcraft: Orcs & Humans*. It was actually quite impressive to see just how far the developer has come, and after playing previous Blizzard efforts like *Blackthorne* and *The Lost Vikings* (*Justice League Task Force* was suspiciously absent), it becomes rather apparent why it has decided to stick to PC point-and-clickery. Blizzard's spectacular artwork was also on display, and collectors with deep pockets could even walk away with some original pieces via the silent auction.

The ever-popular costume and dance contests were held on Friday night, hosted by returning BlizzCon MC Jay Mohr. The costume contest showed off some of the greatest cosplay ever to be made, and also revealed the wide audience Blizzard's games have drawn in. While nerds swooned over attractive female blood elves, it was a Draenei Shaman riding a motorized turtle mount that won the crowd over. It sounds quite

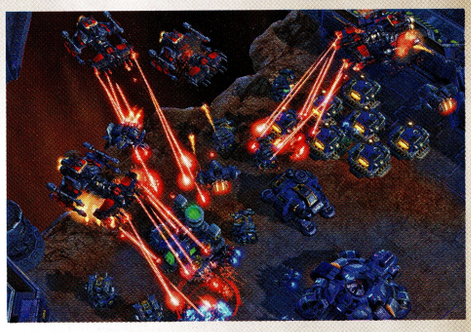
DIABLO III

A newcomer to BlizzCon, *Diablo III* was undoubtedly the belle of the ball. Most of the panels revolved around the game, and it had the biggest demo line by far, from the moment doors opened on Friday morning to the moment they closed on Saturday night. Once eager gamers got their hands on the title, they were not too keen to be kicked off 20 minutes later, and some even got right back in line to give it another go and try out the different classes with up to three of their friends. From what was shown off, *Diablo III* doesn't bring anything especially new to the genre, it just manages to work all of its concepts and inspirations into a near-flawless execution. Unfortunately, gamers will have a long time before they get their hands on what will undoubtedly be one of the most enjoyable PC masterpieces ever made, as *Diablo III* may well be shipping after the first instalment of the *StarCraft II* trilogy, expected in 2009. That puts the return to Sanctuary at a painful estimated release date of late 2009, but knowing Blizzard, it would n't be surprising if *Diablo III* slipped beyond that.

» For much more on *Diablo III*, turn to page 24 for our six-page, in-depth preview of the extremely anticipated title.

WRATH OF THE LICH KING

With its release a mere month away and the beta already out, *Wrath Of The Lich King* was old news. It had the shortest line of all the games, and even had no waiting at all several times throughout the event. The beautiful new continent of Northrend is the major addition to the game, and it really makes the older locations look extremely dated by comparison. *World Of Warcraft* will undoubtedly be a successful title for years and years to come, so hopefully Blizzard will reconsider its stance on a visual overhaul sooner or later to help bring the game as a whole up to par with more recent releases and technology. The Death Knight class is a slight disappointment to be honest, not because of the play mechanics, but because it's the only new class players will be getting. Starting at level 55 also means Death Knights will skip half of the game from the onset, a plus or minus depending on who you ask. Lower-level mounts, a raised level cap and siege weapons are just some of the content being added to Azeroth, but the lack of more than one Hero class or additional playable races is a downright sham. On the positive side, players can keep busy with the game's new Achievement system while waiting for the next expansion.



STARCRAFT II

The show floor of last year's BlizzCon was home to a life-sized statue of Illidan, the star of *The Burning Crusade*. This year, Illidan was pushed off to the far ends of the Convention Center to make way for a breathtaking, immaculately detailed statue of the Queen of Blades herself, Kerrigan. This is all the more fitting since the event introduced the Zerg as a playable race in the demo, accompanying the Terrans and Protoss from last year's event.

At the opening ceremony, Blizzard announced *StarCraft II* would be released as a trilogy, with the Terran campaign expected in 2009, and the Zerg and Protoss to follow respectively, hopefully within a year of each other. Rob Pardo, VP of game design gave **Total PC Gaming** a rough estimate of approximately 30+ hours for each campaign, suggesting that whether gamers play aggressively or defensively, there is going to be a lot of value packed into each release. Whether each campaign will be a standalone product is not yet decided, but the true crime is that we will have to wait several more years before playing as Kerrigan.

ridiculous on paper, but in person it was a pretty exciting spectacle, made all the more so by the collective cheering of 15,000 people. As the grand prize winner for two years in a row, 22-year old Amanda Hosler took home a lifelike replica of Frostmourne, which she definitely earned.

Saturday night was host to the closing ceremony, which kicked off with comedian Patton Oswalt, who completely bombed for what seemed like an eternity before being replaced on-stage by the all-Blizzard metal band, newly-christened Level 80 Tauren Chieftain. Finally, Video Games Live returned to close the night out with their spine-chilling arrangements of Blizzard-only orchestrations.

BlizzCon, as the name suggests, is designed for the most rabid of Blizzard fans – the kind who helped the event sell out in less than a couple of hours. The extracurricular activities were few and far between, leaving little reason for casual and non-gamers to attend. It was a major disappointment that the *World Of Warcraft* movie was completely ignored this year, as it was originally expected to launch in the summer of 2009. Like Blizzard's games, however, BlizzCon is a work in progress, and we imagine that the next one will be even better. At least now we know not to entrust the safety of our goodie bags to a 12-year-old Gnome Pally named Jessica.

William J. Haley

In three words **Deep. Deep. Down.**

LOTRO: MINES OF MORIA

The gates of the ancestral home of the Dwarves swing wide open in the first of our two-part review

Details | **GENRE** Tolkien-esque MMORPG | **DEVELOPER** Turbine
PUBLISHER Codemasters Online | **WEB** www.lotro-europe.com/minesofmoria

You won't be able to use your horse in Moria, but there is an alternative mode of transport...

Turbine landed on its feet when it secured the licence for a *Lord Of The Rings* MMORPG from Tolkien Enterprises: what MMO player wouldn't be interested in immersing themselves in an organic virtual version of Middle-earth? It garnered a massive amount of interest from the MMO community, sold a bundle on its release in April last year, was applauded for its relatively bug-free transition from beta and has held on to a good deal of its player base since, despite huge competition from the likes of *Age Of Conan* and *Warhammer Online*. A major contributor to this success has been the regular free updates, sourced from Tolkien's novels and delivered in the form of several chapters of 'book' quests. Even before the announcement of the first retail expansion, players already embroiled in the lore of Middle-earth would have noticed some glaring omissions on the map: Eriador, land of Men, Elves, Hobbits and Dwarves is present, along with their ancestral homes and the looming threat of Angmar. But where is the daddy of the baddies, lord of the orcs and king of the ring-wraiths?

Mordor and Sauron are notable in their absence from the new *Lord Of The Rings Online* expansion, though the Eye of Sauron frequently makes its presence known in the depths of Moria where the evil of the Balrog has been brewing for aeons. Unless you're buffed to the hilt in areas like the Waterworks then your dread can reach a crippling level. Mordor does make a tantalising appearance on the map overview of the expansion, but the new area you'll be able to roam is restricted to the area surrounding the Eregion region, part of which was recently opened by the Lost Lore quests in *Book 14*, once enough lore had been collected by the community in this server-wide group quest. With the expansion installed, you'll find a portal on the border of the Eriador/Rhovanion overlap flanked by dwarves. This is where you'll pick up the first new chapter of the Mines of Moria epic quest and begin your first steps on the path to Khazad-dûm.

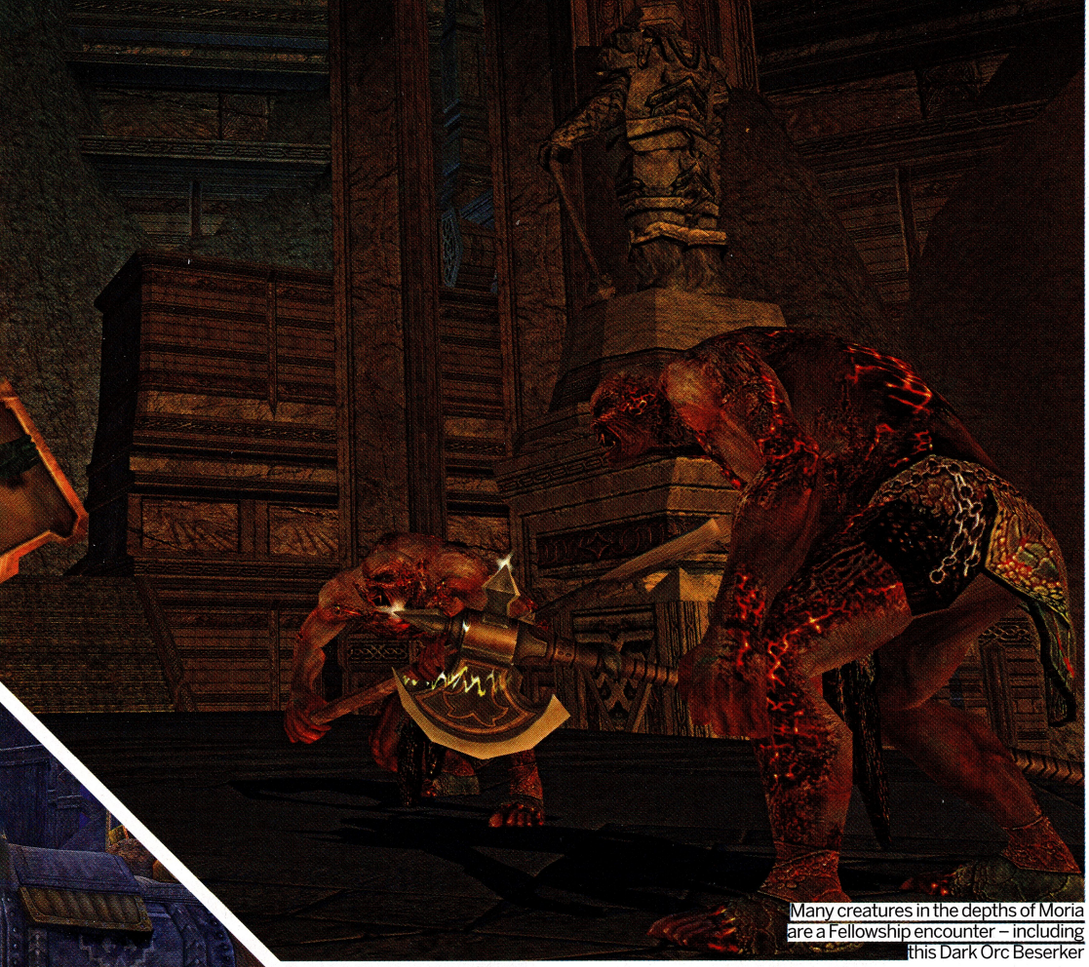
The *Mines Of Moria* itself is designed primarily for those experiencing the newly increased level cap (from 50 to 60), while the surrounding areas can be explored by those approaching Level 50. It's just about solo-able for our sneaky Level 40-something Hobbit, but definitely way out of the depth for anyone that wants to try one of the two new classes: the Warden and the Runekeeper. It's a shame that Turbine has given us these two very interesting multi-class type characters, yet we can't test their mettle in the fiery depths of Moria. For anyone that wants to give them a whirl, it's a somewhat frustrating trek from Thorin's Gates or Archet as a Level 1 character. It's a necessary part of the learning process as these two are very different from any other character classes we've encountered before, but with a little more time and some of Turbine's ample imagination spared this way, it would have been nice to sample a high-level Runekeeper or Warden in *Moria* with a Free People of Middle-earth equivalent of *LOTRO*'s Monster Play.

But even for those with a few alts knocking around on their account, both these new characters should provide a sufficiently different gameplay experience from the others. The Warden has solo character written all over it, and with a preference for medium armour, melee spears and ambush attacks by lobbing javelins at his enemy, it smacks more than a little of a Hunter-style character. Wardens don't fare well against multiple opponents, but like the Hunter, they can tackle single opponents significantly more powerful than themselves provided they've set up an effective ambush. Their ranged damage isn't as powerful as a Hunter, but Wardens balance that with the Gambit system. Depending on what skill choices you've made, you can fire off a series of attacks in combination that will in turn execute a power attack that can inflict crippling damage, debuffs or even

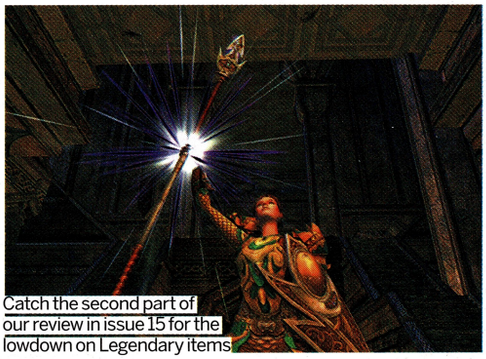
£ Play at all cost

Price to buy
£19.99 SRP
£14.98 Best price
Amazon.co.uk

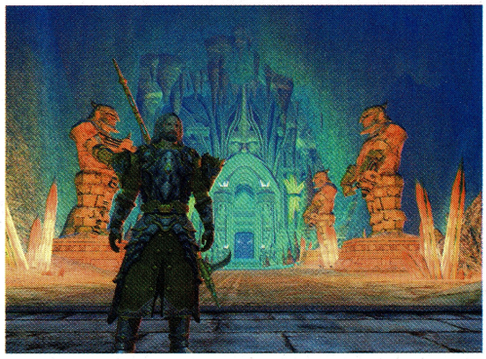
Price to play
£8.99 monthly
» £149.99 lifetime membership

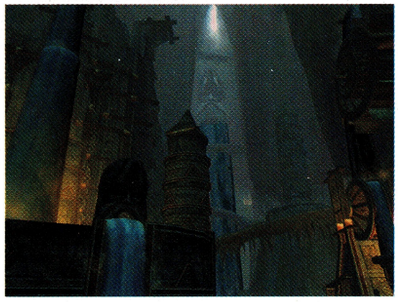


Many creatures in the depths of Moria are a Fellowship encounter – including this Dark Orc Beserker



Catch the second part of our review in issue 15 for the lowdown on Legendary items





"Where is the daddy of the baddies, lord of the orcs and king of the ring-wraiths?"

Different Worlds

The dark fire will not avail you... you shall not pass

» Take a long look at this map (tea stains and all), because therein lies a clue to the future of Turbine's updates and expansions for *Lord Of The Rings Online*. You're currently restricted to the area the far side of the Misty Mountains with the *Mines Of Moria* expansion, but a Middle-earth's worth of content could come from Mirkwood, Rohan and eventually Mordor and Mount Doom itself. If Moria warranted a single expansion, then potentially there's at least another three on this map alone.

restore some of your own morale or power. They're fun to play, but in the broader scope of *LOTRO* we found they were prioritised somewhere near the bottom, alongside Hunters and Burglars, when it comes to Fellowships looking to recruit.

Runekeepers are a very different kettle of Bree-land trout altogether. They fare better in solo combat than Minstrels and can wander around about as carefree as a Loremaster, but they're much more suited to groups and, like the Minstrel, should soon be in demand as soon as the residents of Middle-earth pick up on their versatility as a team player. Turbine has endowed them with the Attunement ability and an Attunement meter, a bar that sways from destructive to healing magic according to the spells you're currently casting. Rain a holy inferno down on your foes and you'll eventually be granted the likes of The Fury of the Storm spell at the cost of the majority of your healing spells. Vice-versa, you can focus your healing abilities to the detriment of your destructive magic, sending your attunment metre far into the healing blue to cast Favour of the Vala. It makes them an incredibly versatile dual-class character, especially in group instances where the needs of the Fellowship can change from healing to a focus on enemy DPS from one combat situation to the next. The attunement ability takes some getting used to and will put some players off at first, but the Runekeeper is a very interesting class, and the long-term rewards, in terms of group and solo play for players willing to invest time levelling this class, are huge.

Ben Biggs

We delve into the Dwarven mountain kingdom of Moria in the next part of our review. Read this and our final, definitive verdict in issue 15!

LISTINGS
GUIDE TO THE TOP MMO GAMES

directory GAMES

It's an intimidating list, we know, but just choose a little MMO and start from there...

Top three...
Free updates

1 EMPYREAN AGE
» This year saw *Eve Online* roll out the Empyrean Age to its fans, tying it to a newly formed Council of Stellar Management to help mediate between the players' needs and developer CCP.

2 BOOK 14
» Turbine released five free updates for *LOTRO* in just over a year. The most recent update, Book 14, introduced a new area, Eregion, as a prelude to the *Mines Of Moria*.

3 THE THIRTEENTH ECLIPSE
» *Dungeons & Dragons Online*, a Turbine MMO that hasn't enjoyed anywhere near the success of *LOTRO*, saw its sixth update this year, and has improved since its disastrous launch.

CITY OF HEROES
» An abundance of timecards in the office means **TPCG** is dipping back into the delights of being a vigilante in silly pants.

Top three...
Unsung heroes

1 RUNESCAPE
» The original free-to-play, browser-based MMO is nearly a decade old and has six million subscribers (one million of whom are paying members) achieved all through word of mouth.

2 PLANETARION
» With real-time events that regularly require you to leap out of bed at god forsaken hours in the morning, *Planetarion* can be considered a hardcore among hardcores.

3 DISCWORLD MUD
» MUDs have been somewhat shunted to one side in the ten years or so that commercial MMOs have come to the fore. *Discworld* is one of the more prominent specimens that deserves to endure.

NAME OF GAME	PRICE TO BUY	PRICE TO PLAY	WEBSITE
9Dragons	Free	Free	9dragons.acclaim.com
A free martial arts MMO from Acclaim, with optional micropayments for buying extra items			
Age Of Conan: Hyborian Adventures	£34.99	£10.34	www.ageofconan.com
Chop people up, drink booze, leer over slave girls and meet King Conan. Now this is an MMO!			
Anarchy Online	Free	Free	www.anarchy-online.com
It's looking worse for wear, but this sci-fi MMORPG is totally free and still very enjoyable			
Asheron's Call: Throne Of Destiny	£14.99	$12.95 P/M	ac.turbine.com
Magic meets aliens in this classic tale of survival against insurmountable odds			
City Of Heroes / City Of Villains	£14.99	£8.99 P/M	www.cityofheroes.com
Play the goodies or the baddies with one subscription in this comic book MMO			
Dark Age Of Camelot	Free	£8 P/M	daoc.goa.com/en
Go medieval with this classic online RPG set in ancient Albion during Arthurian times			
Dungeons & Dragons Online	£2.99	$14.99 P/M	www.ddo-europe.com
Fantasy MMO based on the tabletop RPG with action-driven gameplay			
Eve Online	£14.99	€14.95 P/M	www.eve-online.com
An MMO set in deep space focusing on five races of humanity and the Eve Gate			
EverQuest	£12.99	$14.99 P/M	everquest.station.sony.com
The blockbusting fantasy MMO is still going strong, and it's now great value for money			
EverQuest II	£19.99	£9.49	www.everquest2.com
Join thousands of players in the land of Norrath. The latest expansion includes all previous add-ons			
Final Fantasy XI: Online	£14.98	$12.95	www.playonline.com/ff11us/index.shtml
The first *Final Fantasy* game to be played online. The land of Vana'diel is in peril and only you can save it			
Flyff	Free	Free	gpotato.com
As the name suggests, *Fly For Fun* is all about flying around. It's a cute anime MMO, nuff said			
Guild Wars Complete Collection	£34.99	Free	www.guildwars.com
Retail MMO with no monthly fee. Includes the original game and all four expansion packs			
Hellgate: London	£34.99	£6.95 (optional)	www.hellgatelondon.com
Not just a single-player ARPG, *Hellgate* has all the trappings of an MMO: guilds, parties, chat, trading and, yes, a subscription			
Knight Online	Free	Free	www.knightonlineworld.com
The world's fourth most-played MMO. It's free, but does offer additional content for premium members			
The Legend Of Mir 3	Free	£4.99	www.lom3europe.com
A typically impenetrable Korean MMO, but it's one of the best if you're into grinding and levelling			
Lineage II	£9.99	£8.99	eu.lineage2.com
A medieval MMO, Korean style, where knights and magical creatures clash head-on			
LOTR Online: Shadows Of Angmar	£14.99	£8.99 P/M	www.lotro-europe.com
Could Frodo, Gandalf and co be enough to tempt players away from *World Of Warcraft*?			
The Matrix Online	$19.95	$14.99 P/M	thematrixonline.station.sony.com
Neo and company gang up against a relentless army of Agent Smiths. Perfect MMO subject material			
Phantasy Star Universe	£29.99	£6.99 P/M	www.phantasystaruniverse.com
Play on or offline in this continuation of the classic Sega RPG			
Pirates Of The Burning Sea	£24.99	$14.99	www.burningsea.com
Pirates are most definitely en vogue, so this has to be the first MMO that makes players cool, right?			
Planetarion	Free	Free	www.planetarion.com
A browser-based MMO places gamers in control of a planet, mining its asteroids for resources and sending fleets of spaceships against other players			
Planetside	£2.99	$14.99	planetside.station.sony.com
Jump into powered armour, tanks, buggies, aircraft and wield all manner of guns in this MMOFPS			
Runescape	Free	Free (optional P/M)	www.runescape.com
The second-most subscribed MMO in the world and utterly different from the world of Azeroth			
Star Wars Galaxies (complete)	£32.99	$14.99	starwarsgalaxies.station.sony.com
Despite SOE's best attempts at killing it, *SWG* is still going and is a great experience for die-hard *Star Wars* fans			
Tabula Rasa	£19.99	£8.99	www.rgtr.com
Richard Garriot returns with a sci-fi MMORPG that's heavy on the action			
Ultima Online	£14.99	$12.99	www.uoherald.com/news
A classic among MMOs that is set in the land of Britannia and has spawned no less than seven expansions			
Vanguard: Saga Of Heroes	£17.99	$14.99	vanguard.station.sony.com
Set in the land of Thestra, this RPG was released earlier last year and is fast becoming a cult hit			
Warhammer Online: Age Of Reckoning	£34.99	£8.99	www.warhammeronline.com
Arguably the biggest and smoothest MMO launch ever, *WAR* is proving incredibly popular and tempting more than a few from the wonders of *WOW*			
World Of Warcraft	£9.99	£18.00 for 60 days	www.wow-europe.com
The game that needs no introduction – 11 million players worldwide can't be wrong			

November's *Wrath Of The Lich King* brings a potentially laggy new raid zone

Top three... Notorious Events

1 THE HEIST
» *Eve Online* saw one of the most infamous incidents in MMO history: the Guiding Hand Social Club infiltrated a rival corporation and brought them down from within.

2 THE ICONOCLAST
» *EverQuest*'s Kerafyrm was never meant to be killed, but after a failed first attempt (Sony pulled the plug), and an epic battle involving 180 guild members, the old dragon finally went down.

3 THE ASSASSINATION
» Richard Garriott made a grand entrance into the beta for *Ultima Online*. He was supposed to be invulnerable, but character Rainz flamed him to death.

Top three... Charity Beneficiaries

1 KIBOU NO HANE
» Otherwise known as the 'Feather Of Hope', Japanese publisher Gaiax sold this in its *Stonehenge* game. The proceeds went to Save The Children.

2 KATRINA RELIEF
» Among other publishing companies aiding the victims of Hurricane Katrina, Linden Labs allowed *Second Life* players to donate Linden dollars to the cause.

3 MMO CHARITY CALENDAR
» The smaller but no-less needy St. Jude Children's Research hospital in Tennessee benefited from a 2007 MMORPG calendar, with MMO art for each month.

directory BROADBAND FOR GAMING

So you've put your PC together, and it's lightning fast with a 24-inch monitor and 7:1 surround sound system. Brilliant for single-player gaming but useless for MMOs, unless you've done your homework and got yourself a reliable broadband package. Not just any two megabit connection will do, especially if you're sharing it with family or housemates, so check out our guide and directory below for an idea of the speed and service that you want.

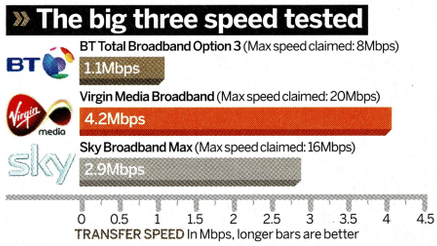
PROVIDER	PACKAGE	COST P/M	SPEED	D/L LIMIT	CONTRACT	WEBSITE
Be*	Be Unlimited	£18.00	24Mb	Unlimited*	3 months	www.bethere.co.uk
BT	BT Option 3	£24.99	8Mb	Unlimited*	18 months	www.bt.com
Bulldog	Unlimited Plus	£24.50	16Mb	Unlimited*	12 months	www.bulldogbroadband.com
Demon	Home 8000	£17.99	8Mb	Unlimited*	12 months	www.demon.net
Eclipse	Home Pro	£29.99	8Mb	50GB	12 months	www.eclipse.net.uk
Fast4	Max Pro	£15.95	24Mb	30GB	12 months	www.fast4.net
FMN	ADSL	£41.99	8Mb	Unlimited	3 months	www.fmn.uk.net
Madasafish	Max Premier	£25.99	8Mb	50GB	12 months	www.madasafish.com
02	Ultimate	£20.00	20Mb	Unlimited*	12 months	broadband.o2.co.uk
Orange	Orange Home Max	£24.00	8Mb	Unlimited*	18 months	orange.co.uk/shop
Pipex	Pipex Pro	£39.99	8Mb	100GB	12 months	www.pipex.co.uk
Sky	Broadband Max	£10	16Mb	Unlimited*	12 months	www.sky.com/broadband
TalkTalk	Talk Global	£16.99	8Mb	40GB	18 months	www.talktalk.co.uk
Tiscali	Broadband Only	£14.99	8Mb	Unlimited*	12 months	www.tiscali.co.uk
UK Online	Premier	£24.99	16Mb	Unlimited*	12 months	www.ukonline.net
Virgin media	Virgin Media XL (cable)	£23.50	8Mb	Unlimited*	18 months	www.virginmedia.com

* Fair usage policy applies

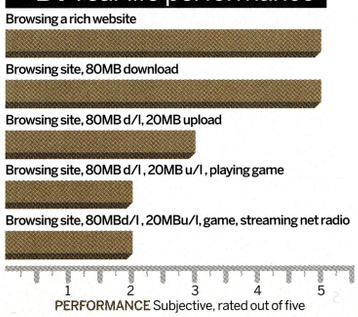
Gaming broadband explained

Take a look at the big three speed test to the right of this paragraph, then look at the real-life performances below: you'll notice big discrepancies between the maximum broadband speed and the actual speed. This is all relative to where you live, as living close to a telephone exchange can really boost your broadband performance, though you're highly unlikely to ever see it hit the theoretical maximum you've subscribed to. It will also make a huge difference to your speed depending whether you're Facebooking a friend or embarking on a one-man, 36-character *World Of Warcraft* raid in the depths of Ironforge.

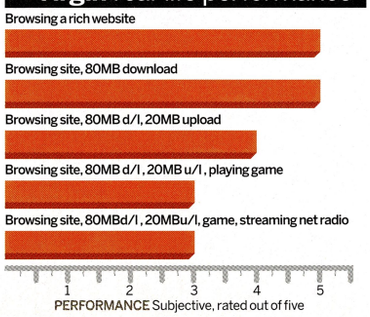
» The big three speed tested



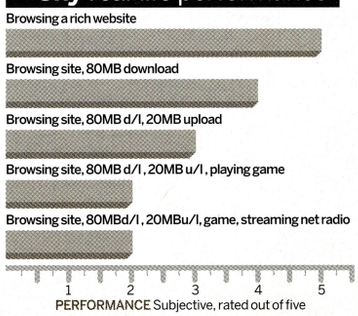
» BT real-life performance



» Virgin real-life performance



» Sky real-life performance



DON'T LOOK BACK IN ANGER

THE BEST OF 2008

WE RECKON WE'VE DEVELOPED RSI – LITTLE WONDER GIVEN THE GREAT GAMES OF 2008. DAVID CROOKES DISCOVERS THE TITLES THAT GRABBED OUR ATTENTION

The PC gaming industry is in tatters. It's dominated by *The Sims* and *World Of Warcraft*. And those savvy enough to be able to put together a decent gaming rig are also clued up when it comes to downloading illegal copies of games, so developers may as well give up. Says who? No less than Peter Molyneux and Epic lead designer Cliff Bleszinski, that's who.

But they are wrong. If 2008 is anything to go by, PC gaming is so much more than becoming obsessed with the lives of virtual people and fighting monsters in Azeroth. While both have continued to enthral us this past year, it's the sparkling gems – the *Multiwinias*, the *Spores* and the *TrackMania Forevers* that show just why PC gaming is actually thriving.

You may expect us to say that, writing, as we do, for **Total PC Gaming**. However, the figures speak for themselves, and the PC Gaming Alliance is quick to point out that the PC gaming industry is worth £10.7 billion. Oh, and our preferred platform remains the world's favourite, too.

Yet it would be wrong to say PC gaming doesn't continue to face serious issues. Piracy and DRM continue to dominate the agenda, and we saw that starkly with *Spore*, a game that was illegally downloaded more than 600,000 times within weeks of release, and carried restrictions that prevented it from being used on more than three machines.

That, though, is to miss the point of gaming. We play in order to entertain ourselves, and when we look back at 2008, there were more than enough titles to get us all giddy. So let's cut the chat and get on with discovering which ones stood out.

»Do look back in anger!

TURNING POINT: FALL OF LIBERTY ■ March 2008

There's a lot to be said about hype. Take Codemasters' *Turning Point* – glossy pamphlets, lovely videos, PRs constantly on the telephone enthusing in gushing tones. Then look at the resulting game: a big, fat steaming pile of unfinished bile that attempted, and yet made a ham-fisted stab at addressing, the interesting question of what would have happened had Winston Churchill died before the Second World War. America saves the day, key monuments fall, and when you're not falling asleep you're battling with the bugs.

TRACKMANIA NATIONS FOREVER

»Developer Nadeo **»Publisher** Digital Jesters
»Website www.trackmania.com/en **»Released** April

If there was ever a racer that dominated the TPCG office, it was *TrackMania Nations Forever*. Guaranteed to turn the knuckles white, it was stripped of all of the expected fancy gubbins (no real-world circuits or championships) leaving you with a race to the finish in the fastest time possible.

The game was created as a taster for *TrackMania United Forever*, so it's available as a free download. Yet don't for one minute think that it relegates this speedster to demo status. The races may be short, but they're varied, challenging and fun. And there's a thriving online community with all of the social sharing and comparing tools you could imagine.

»Did you know...?
"By pressing the £ key, you can unlock the orbital view in TrackMania Nations Forever"

"I love *TrackMania*," says Howard Marks, boss of Acclaim Games. "It's an original, online, free-to-play game and it perfectly fits the model of the future of gaming. This game has a lasting gameplay value because of the strong community. It has user-generated content and tools built into the game, a great community of players and lots of innovative gameplay ideas. You feel a sense of community just by going into the game and playing. I see *TrackMania* as a milestone in our industry."

LOOKING BACK

■ Ground-breaking **9** ■ Controversial **3** ■ Successful **9** ■ Worth a sequel **9**

SPORE

»Developer Maxis **»Publisher** Electronic Arts
»Website www.spore.com **»Released** September

Sim Everything? You betcha. The exploration of biology that is *Spore* is enthralling, both in terms of the gameplay and the sheer scale of the game. Some are calling it Will Wright's finest hour, and in the evolution of his gaming career, *Spore* is certainly a whole, fresh new species.

There were sneers that the ambition of the game, that taking a multicellular organism and controlling its evolution into a sizable, breathing, colonising and exploring creature would prove too overwhelming for the developer. The end result surpasses the concept, however, and each section is polished and the experience is inherently experimental and progressive.

If there is criticism, it's over the price (£39.99), the perceived dumbing down (Will Wright says he has targeted a mainstream audience), the dreaded DRM and the piracy (some say the licence restrictions led to *Spore*'s mass piracy). And there are some who just don't like it. "I found it dreadfully boring," Capcom PR man Leo Tan tells us. But it's a landmark game, and we reckon it's one of the finest to grace a PC.

"*Spore* for me is like sitting in a high-end luxury car," says Ron Carmel, creator of *World Of Goo*. "When you sit in a car and play around with the buttons, you quickly get a feel for how well it was built and you'll get a sense of the level of artistry, precision, and craftsmanship. *Spore* is the same. Just playing with the *Spore Creature Creator* impressed me, both with the technical achievement and the feel of the whole thing. It's a stunning game."

LOOKING BACK

■ Ground-breaking **9** ■ Controversial **10** ■ Successful **8** ■ Worth a sequel **8**

»Did you know...?
"Sim Everything was the original title for Spore"

WARHAMMER ONLINE: AGE OF RECKONING

» **Developer** EA Mythic » **Publisher** NC EA
» **Website** www.warhammeronline.com » **Released** September

One of the biggest massively multiplayer game releases of 2008, *Warhammer Online* is an epic battle of good versus evil that fulfils all of the promises it made throughout its development. The full-on Realm versus Realm dynamic makes you feel immersed in war as you go about hacking through warring enemy tribes.

This is a darkly humoured game that catches your attention and keeps you playing, but it hasn't been without its problems. Registration troubles and issues with the server meant the game got off to a bad start in Europe. Since then, those hiccups have been ironed out and thousands have flocked from *World Of Warcraft* to check it out.

»Did you know...?
"Over 13,000 people have been banned from the game for selling gold"

Paul Sams, Blizzard's COO, however, says many of them have gone back to *WOW*. But he is nevertheless impressed by *Warhammer* – which is boasting close to a million registrations. "There's a lot of talent at Mythic, and *Warhammer* is certainly a good game," says Sams. "It's had problems, but that's to be expected when you launch a new MMO. It's not an easy thing to do. But of all of the MMOs that have been released since *World Of Warcraft*, I would say *Warhammer Online: Age Of Reckoning* will be the one most likely to succeed and it helps, of course, that EA has the financial muscle to make an impact."

LOOKING BACK

Ground-breaking **7** Controversial **6** Successful **8** Worth a sequel **8**

GTA IV

» **Developer** Rockstar North » **Publisher** Rockstar
» **Website** www.rockstargames.com/IV » **Released** November

Setting new standards for videogames, *Grand Theft Auto IV* is both mind-blowing and awe-inspiring at once. That it has made its way to the PC just makes it all the sweeter. It means a wider audience than ever before can delve deep into the politically charged, mean underbelly of Liberty City and soak in the atmosphere with Nico Bellic and his cousin Roman. You could argue that *GTA IV* is the best videogame ever.

Introversion producer Byron Atkinson-Jones certainly likes it. "What I really like about *GTA IV* is the small details of the world," he says. "An example of that was when I stole a car by kicking the driver out of the seat and just taking the car. I was tearing away through the streets at top speed and all I could hear was screaming. At first my reaction was that it was odd to have your character screaming at your driving, it kind of breaks the mood. However, when I came to a halt through a crash the passenger who I had not realised was there got out, screamed a bit and ran off into the distance – I couldn't stop laughing for ages.

"The game immerses the player into the story from the opening animation to the actual in-game world, so you actually feel a part of the story – not just viewing it like other games. Only one other game has done that for me and that was *Call Of Duty 4*."

»Did you know...?
"The PC version includes a newly expanded multiplayer mode. Of course you did!"

LOOKING BACK

Ground-breaking **9** Controversial **10** Successful **10** Worth a sequel **10**

»Do look back in anger!

HARD TO BE A GOD ■ February 2008

It was one of those games that, unlike the aforementioned *Turning Point*, avoided the radars of most gaming media outlets. Like a poor B-movie heading straight for Woolworth's bargain bin, the tedious RPG *Hard To Be A God* arrived all washed-up and ready to be put down just as soon as it was picked up. Mixing medieval with space age, on the face of it, it was at least trying. But before you could even begin to get engrossed in the gameplay, you had to endure crippling bugs and the bore of an initial eight-hour slog. And who has time to do that?

MULTIWINIA

» **Developer** In-house » **Publisher** Introversion
» **Website** www.introversion.co.uk » **Released** September

War would be easy if you had the Multiwinians behind you – their sheer number is more than enough to frighten even the most battle-hardy of foes. And what if you put *Multiwinia* up against its predecessor, *Darwinia*? Well, it would be a close call, but the latter would probably win.

But then, taking such a classic game as *Darwinia*, simplifying it somewhat and making it multiplayer results in a spectacularly addictive pick-up-and-play game. For that reason, it takes its proud place among the best of 2008.

»Did you know...?

"At the time of writing, Multiwinia's metacritic user rating is 9.5, but just 16 people have voted – the lowest number for an Introversion title."

The game has not been a massive success in terms of sales. Since its release, its creator Chris Delay has pleaded with gamers to spread the word and fly the flag for indie developers. It's a battle Introversion should not have to fight.

LOOKING BACK

■ Ground-breaking **7** ■ Controversial **3** ■ Successful **2** ■ Worth a sequel **9**

RACE DRIVER: GRID

» **Developer** In-house » **Publisher** Codemasters
» **Website** www.racedrivergrid.com » **Released** May

Although the *TOCA Race Driver* series quickly garnered favour among PC gamers as a hardcore pursuit, over time it has become more mainstream, as if to appeal to the console generation. With *Grid*, the car tuning and setup aspects are banished and the series moves up an arcade gear.

»Did you know...?

"A million people downloaded the Race Driver: Grid demo on the PC, PS3 and Xbox 360"

It's intense, fast and the sheer quality shines through. "It's graphically stunning and pretty much faultless in that respect," says Loz Doyle, head producer on *Lego Batman*. "The handling to me feels spot on and well varied across all the different cars – if the handling isn't right then the whole game would be ruined. There's a big variety of different races and challenges, the AI is excellent, aggressive and even makes mistakes – quite often spinning out right in front of you. But the really great thing is that clever replay system. The way you can control the speed of it right down to frame-by-frame, but then giving you the chance to undo a crash. When you hear about it, you think it's cheating and is going to ruin the game, but it's quite the opposite. It means you can push harder in races if you need to, without the fear of having to restart all the time. It also means you can do some spectacular crashes on purpose and watch thousands of pieces of cars flying all over the track. A truly excellent race game experience."

Lee Kirton, Atari's PR man, agrees and says of his rival firm's game, "I felt *Grid* was pure excitement smothered in excellent presentation. The graphics are beautiful and the racing itself just felt constantly tight and exciting. *Grid* for me was the only racing title that kind of dumped the rules of racing and really focused on hardcore bangs and Hollywood flare. There was always fun in every race, especially using the touring cars in San Francisco. *Grid* deserves to be up there as the best arcade racer that really delivers on thrills."

LOOKING BACK

■ Ground-breaking **6** ■ Controversial **5** ■ Successful **8** ■ Worth a sequel **8**

CRYSIS WARHEAD

» **Developer** Crytek Budapest » **Publisher** EA
» **Website** crysiswarhead.ea.com » **Released** September

Crysis Warhead is a beauty. It looks great, it vastly improves the AI of the original and it is without doubt a standout shooter, proving just why it's worth sticking with a PC as your premier gaming platform. There's a richness to the environments that lends a refined feel to the game, and there's a greater depth to it than the precursor. The multiplayer element has been also enhanced, but despite all of these rejigs, it's still possible to play the game without having to rip your PC apart and upgrade... well, assuming you have a decent rig in the first place. "*Crysis* is awesome," says Epic Games' design director Cliff Bleszinski. "It needs a lot of power, but you're talking about a slick-looking game that you can really kick around."

»Did you know...?
"Crysis Warhead is not intended to be part two of the Crysis trilogy. It's supposed to be a standalone expansion pack"

LOOKING BACK

Ground-breaking **6** Controversial **6** Successful **9** Worth a sequel **9**

S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: CLEAR SKY

» **Developer** GSC Game World » **Publisher** Deep Silver
» **Website** www.stalker-game.com/clearsky » **Released** September

In creating what is effectively the prequel to *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow Of Chernobyl*, GSC Game World went back a year in order to explain the events which led up to the start of its previous cult classic game. It resulted in a visually and psychologically thrilling (not to mention cack-your-pants scary) FPS. And it's a genuine fear – at any point you could die, and you stab around in the dark with caution as a result. It's obvious the developer has drawn on the techniques of horror movies, cranking up the tension to near-unbearable levels to make *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Clear Sky* one of the best first-person shooters of all time, never mind for 2008.

»Did you know...?
"Some of the new features of Clear Sky were removed from Shadow Of Chernobyl"

"It's a f***ing excellent game," says Vince Desi, boss of *Postal* creator Running With Scissors. "You know, I don't get much time to play games any more and there can be a tendency to over-analyse when you do, but *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Clear Sky* is majorly advanced. Let me tell you, when I was younger I used to work in a pizza restaurant, and I f***ing hated pizzas, and at times now – when I work on a game – I get fed up with games, but this one grabbed me, for sure."

LOOKING BACK

Ground-breaking **7** Controversial **6** Successful **8** Worth a sequel **8**

»Do look back in anger!

MERCENARIES 2: WORLD IN FLAMES ■ October 2008

Quite what EA was thinking when it decided to release *Mercenaries 2* in the unfinished state that it was in is anybody's guess, but those bugs, those many, many, many bugs, didn't so much annoy us as make us want to chew the carpet in sheer anger. They ruined what was otherwise a solid game, and one that should have been received more positively. All of the good things about the title are put to the back of the mind the moment something awful pops on screen. Patience, EA, patience.

RED ALERT 3

» **Developer** EA Los Angeles » **Publisher** Electronic Arts
» **Website** www.ea.com/redalert » **Released** October

»Did you know...?
"The original Red Alert was bundled on the issue 12 cover DVD of Total PC Gaming"

Marked with retro, shiny styling and a silly story to keep with the tradition of this superb series, *Command & Conquer Red Alert 3* certainly has humour. It also has 27 missions spread over three campaigns that are not so much a bloodbath as an addictive real-time strategy game for pyromaniacs.

"I remember when *C&C* was still in development at Virgin while we were finishing off *Cannon Fodder*," says Jon Hare, the programmer behind the brilliant retro football game, *Sensible Soccer*. "I remember wondering why the output of Virgin US was pushed over in Europe when *Cannon Fodder* was not given the same support in the UK. I remember being resentful of Westwood stealing the plaudits for the creation of a game genre that *Cannon Fodder* helped to define. But I think even now there is a lot of room for improvement and innovation in these games and personally I like the genre."

Like *Spore*, however, EA has saddled *Red Alert 3* with DRM, using the controversial SecuROM software. It limits installs to five PCs and this has upset many a PC gamer. In 2009, we hope EA will bang a few heads together to come up with a better anti-piracy solution.

LOOKING BACK

■ Ground-breaking **5** ■ Controversial **9** ■ Successful **8** ■ Worth a sequel **8**

FALLOUT 3

» **Developer** In-house » **Publisher** Bethesda
» **Website** fallout.bethsoft.com » **Released** October

»Did you know...?
"Fallout 3 was refused classification by the OFLC in Australia since it contained reference to morphine. Bethesda then changed the name to Med-X and got it through."

In the lead up to Christmas, PC gamers will probably be getting their wallet out for three games in particular: *Spore*, *GTA IV* and this, *Fallout 3*. While the first two have true mass market appeal, Bethesda's massive RPG oozes ambition. What other word could there be for a game that has more than 200 possible endings and more than 100 hours of gameplay?

We've only been playing it for mere weeks, but, despite coming out late in the day, the quality is obvious from the very beginning. "*Fallout 3* has got to be my choice," says veteran programmer Gregg '*Discworld*' Barnett. "I haven't played *Far Cry 2* yet, so that may well beat it – who knows? But I loved *Fallout 2* and the sequel has been something I've been waiting for."

Barnett is a major RPG fan. "But to be honest, I'm waiting patiently for a really good open-world open-story RPG. I doubt that *Fable II* will be it, but I'll know soon I guess. *Mass Effect* had potential but tapered off after a while. *Neverwinter Nights* games are too linear and reliant on 'buffing' characters. I'm actually amusing myself by designing the sort of RPG I'd like to play."

LOOKING BACK

■ Ground-breaking **9** ■ Controversial **10** ■ Successful **9** ■ Worth a sequel **10**

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24-INCH MONITORS

» The ultimate showdown of the biggest and best widescreens

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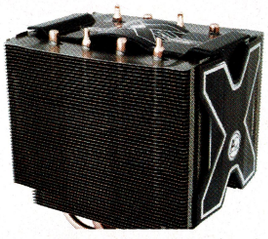
» Cyberpower's latest update offers Triple SLI

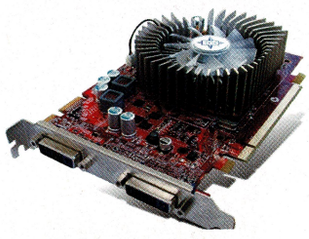
COOLER MASTER HAF 932

» Cooler Master's latest case is big, but is it beautiful?



FREEZER EXTREME

» Arctic Cooling's gargantuan heatsink scores big



MSI RADEON R4670 512MB

» ATI's latest card gets benchmarked

Group test

24" GAM TFT MON

Monitor prices have plummeted over the last few years, so there is no longer any excuse to be using a tiny 17-inch monitor for PC gaming. The greater the screen size, the greater the immersion, and in general, the sharper the picture. While 22-inch screens have become the most popular size for gamers recently, they actually offer no improvement over smaller 20-inch models in detail, as the resolution is still 1680 x 1050. With a resolution of 1920 x 1200, however, 24-inch monitors are able to compete with modern Full-HD television sets and offer PC gamers the same level of detail achievable on the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 consoles.

While screens larger than 24-inch are also available, they generally need to be set back far enough that all the information can still be seen without moving your head – necessitating a desk that will be too large for many homes. A 24-inch panel will be just right for most people, offering the perfect balance on the other hand, of detail, screen real-estate and usability. We will be rating our four contenders in this group test based on their image quality, features and connectivity options, but most importantly on their suitability for gaming. While any screen will be suitable for slower-paced genres like RTS or RPG games, fast-paced first-person shooters are much more demanding and will quickly show up any problems. We tested each screen's prowess with *Quake 4* deathmatch, *Unreal Tournament 3* and *Gears Of War*, but also used each screen for a few days for general web browsing and office work. After all, we all need a break from fragging every now and then!

£385
» Dell UltraSharp 2408WFP Monitor
Dell's large UltraSharp displays have delivered excellent performance for years, but is the 2408WFP as good as its predecessors?

£621
» NEC 24WMGX3 Monitor
At over £600, the NEC will need to be the Rolls Royce of PC screens to attract users over the much cheaper competition.

ING ITORS

With their beautiful resolution of 1920 x 1200 pixels, 24-inch monitors are becoming increasingly attractive to gamers. Despite plummeting costs recently, they are still pricey, so choosing carefully is essential

» Samsung SM-2493HM Monitor **£307**

At half the cost of our most expensive display, Samsung has delivered the 2493HM at a very attractive price

» Asus MK241 Monitor **£326**

Asus has added extra value to its 24-inch offering by incorporating extras like speakers, HDMI and a webcam

? FAQ

Why does the cost of TFTs vary so much?

As well as offering different connectivity and display modes, the technology employed in the construction of PC screens is also a major factor in their cost. The cheapest screens use a TN (Twisted Nematic+Film) type panel, while more expensive models use IPS (In Plane Switching), MVA (Multi-domain Vertical Alignment) or PVA (Patterned Vertical Alignment). TN Panels are generally very fast, but suffer from poorer viewing angles and colour definition.

Do I need a high-end graphics card for a 24-inch screen?

For general desktop use, even an entry-level modern video card will be powerful enough for a 24-inch screen. When it comes to gaming, however, you will need something with plenty of grunt to enjoy the latest titles. 1920 x 1200 is the resolution at which high-end cards like the GeForce GTX 280 and Radeon 4870 were designed to excel. To run games like *Crysis* at a decent speed you will certainly need at least an 8800 series GeForce or better.

The Asus is reasonably priced and sports some very promising specifications

£326

ASUS MK241 24" MONITOR

Web Manufacturer: www.asus.com Supplier: www.asus.com

On paper, the Asus MK241 has a near-perfect specification for gamers. Its response time is lightning-fast at two milliseconds, it has a very high contrast ratio and the 450cd/m2 brightness rating is equally impressive. The screen also sports a built-in webcam and microphone module that will appeal to those not wanting the clutter of a standalone device. The styling is a bit of a mixed bag, with an attractive aluminium base supporting the rather plain-looking screen section. The functionality of the stand can only be described as basic, as adjustment is limited to just tilt. This would be forgivable if the MK241 had excellent viewing angles, but unfortunately this wasn't the case. Even with the screen sat on piles of TPCG back issues until it was level with our eyes, we still couldn't fully alleviate viewing angle-related problems. When the screen was tilted so that the bottom was outputting colours correctly, the top was out of kilter or vice versa. While this is a limitation of all TN panels, the effect isn't usually this distracting.

Out of the box the MK241 is borderline unusable, with an incredibly over-saturated output that is painfully bright when viewing web pages or office documents. The colour palette was also off, as everything appeared far greener than we would have liked. Playing with the brightness level improved the situation, though this also adversely affected the contrast, and no amount of fiddling produced an image we were pleased with for desktop use. For gaming the screen was certainly better, with no noticeable lag and a truly ghost-free image. Nevertheless, the colours were washed out and lacked the kind of rich, realistic hues available from some of the competition.

Access to the monitor's comprehensive menus is achieved via six buttons at the bottom right-hand side of the screen. These feel wobbly and cheap (failing the all-important tactile test), but are easy to use. Connectivity is simple but decent, with VGA, DVI and HDMI available. We tested the screen's HDMI mode using a PlayStation 3, and it happily accepted the 1920 x 1080 resolution. Pleasingly, there is a setting within the GUI that allows 1:1 pixel mapping or full-screen modes, so you can play at the correct aspect ratio or scale the image to fill the monitor if you prefer.

Scaling is one area where the Asus fails dismally, with a number of resolutions below 1920 x 1200 showing appalling scaling artefacts, the likes of which we have not seen in TFTs since the first colour laptops appeared. This would make a decent graphics card a necessity, as dropping the resolution to 1680 x 1050 would not be a pleasant proposition should the frame rates get a bit choppy.

The Asus MK241 is a massive disappointment. While its fast panel and impressive specification make it look like a great choice for gamers initially, the severe image quality problems mean we simply can't recommend it, even at its low price. If Asus wishes to become a real contender in the gaming monitor arena, it needs to get the basics right first.

Verdict

»Overall Don't be fooled by this screen's excellent specification. It has major viewing angle problems, poor colour reproduction, scaling issues and is far too bright for general use.

5

The included webcam connects via a USB cable, but Asus has not taken full advantage of this as there are no extra ports provided on the MK241. Dual microphones ensure very good recording quality

The stand is simple and handsome, but its functionality is disappointingly limited to just tilt functions. The buttons are easily accessible at the bottom right, though they feel wobbly and cheap

Head-to-head

The main features compared

Stand and mounting

» The Asus stand is easy to fit, clipping onto the bottom of the monitor and securing firmly with a screw. Adjustment is limited to tilt only, with no rotation, height adjustment or pivot functions. Should you wish to wall-mount the Asus, there are four screw holes hidden behind a removable bezel. The very limited viewing angles make optimising the MK241 a tricky and frustrating exercise.

Connectivity and specifications

» The Asus stand is easy to fit, clipping onto the bottom of the monitor and securing firmly with a screw. Adjustment is limited to tilt only, with no rotation, height adjustment or pivot functions. Should you wish to wall-mount the Asus, there are four screw holes hidden behind a removable bezel. The very limited viewing angles make optimising the MK241 a tricky and frustrating exercise.

Head-to-head
The main features compared

Stand and mounting
» The Samsung's stand is easily one of the best we have seen, with an attractive glossy finish and outstanding functionality. Tilt, rotate, pivot and the all-important height-adjust are all supported, and the stand can be unscrewed if you prefer to wall-mount your screens. It even has a USB hub. At just £300, we think the Samsung is the best looking 24-inch screen you can buy right now.

Connectivity and specifications
» Connectivity is limited to DVI, VGA and HDMI, though the latter is seriously harmed by the absence of a 1:1 mapping mode. Elsewhere, the specifications are excellent with a 5 millisecond response time, a 400cd/m2 rating for the brightness and a contrast ratio of 1000:1. As usual, Samsung provides an outstanding three-year warranty including a zero dead pixel policy.

The Samsung looks very high-end thanks to touch-sensitive buttons and a glossy piano black finish. We also like the silver detailing and the stand is simply outstanding for a screen at this price

The Samsung may have HDMI and built-in speakers, but isn't a good choice for PlayStation 3 or Xbox 360 users due to a lack of aspect adjustments. Fortunately, for PC gaming the screen provided us with some excellent results

SAMSUNG SM-2493HM 24"

£307

Large-scale TN done right?

Web Manufacturer: www.samsung.com Supplier: www.chillblast.com

Initially, we didn't have high hopes for the SM-2493HM as it uses the same TN technology that caused us so many headaches when testing the Asus. Nevertheless, we put any preconceptions to the back of our minds and reviewed the Samsung based on its own merits. One thing Samsung has got bang-on with this screen is the aesthetics, with a beautiful glossy piano black bezel set nicely off by silver detailing along the bottom edge. Samsung has not spoilt this sleek look with buttons, as it has fitted the 2493HM with touch-sensitive controls. Despite having no tactile response, these worked perfectly and certainly gave the monitor a very high-end feel. Another feature that belies the Samsung's very attractive price tag is the stand, as it is among the best we have seen and came complete with a USB hub.

In addition to the usual tilt, Samsung has enabled users to rotate the screen on its base, adjust the height by a very useful amount and even pivot the screen, enabling you to change to a portrait orientation to better view letters and other documents. The stand can also be removed if you would prefer to wall-mount the display. In terms of connectivity, the Samsung offers DVI, VGA and HDMI options, the latter of which we tested with the PS3. Unlike our other contenders, we were not able to select a 1:1 aspect mode, making the Samsung unsuitable for those that like to watch movies or play games without a stretched picture. This was disappointing, as every other screen in our test included this functionality.

The image quality of the SM-2493HM was very good right out of the box, easily beating our best results with the Asus even after hours of tweaking. Although the colour palette was certainly no match for the Dell or NEC screens, it will be accurate enough for most users and exhibited none of the brightness problems of the other TN panel. The technology's viewing angle issues were again highlighted with the Samsung, though we had no problem adjusting the screen to flawless uniformity when viewing it straight on, it just isn't suitable for sharing, making it a poor choice for a TV replacement unless you watch your movies on your own.

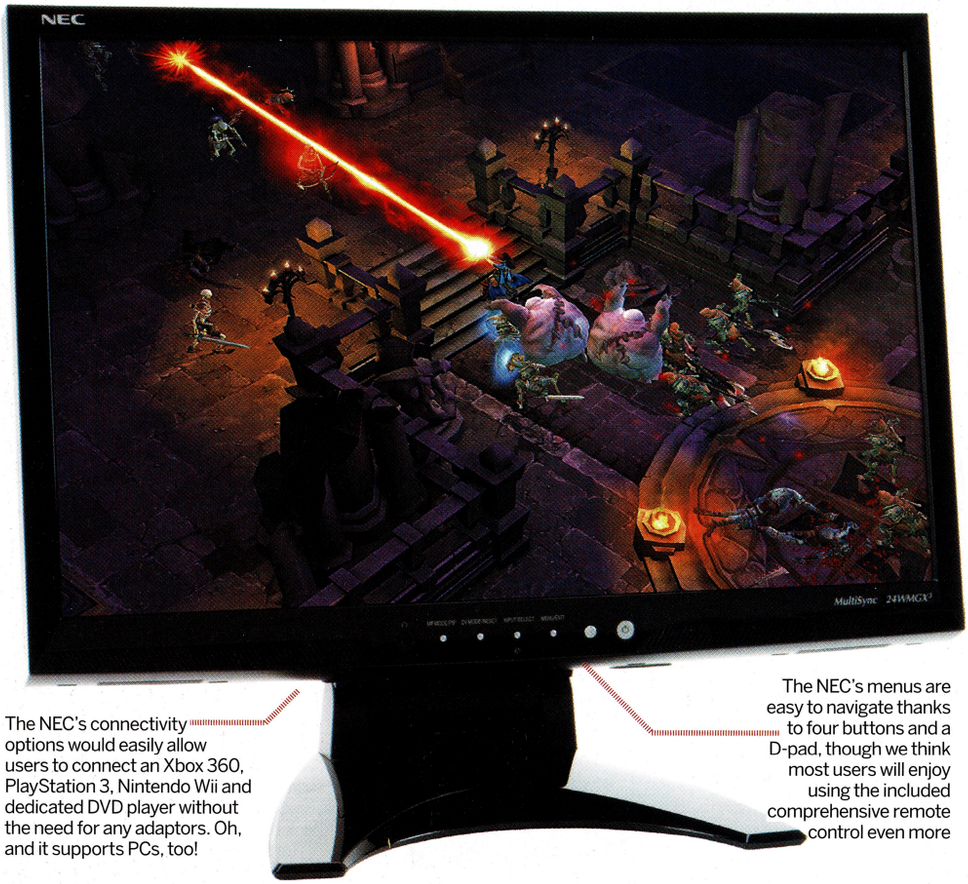
For gaming, the Samsung delivered exceptional results, with ghost and lag-free images that almost popped out of the screen thanks to the wonderful 1920 x 1200 resolution. Colours were also reproduced faithfully, though they still appeared a little washed out next to the NEC and Dell. Nevertheless, the SM-2493 is a much more affordable monitor, and therefore this compromise will be an acceptable trade-off to many.

Overall, the Samsung is a perfect example of how to make a decent TN-type monitor. It doesn't exactly match the outstanding prowess of any PVA, IPS or MVA alternatives, but then at just a touch over £300, we didn't think it would. Providing you don't plan on using the Samsung for your games consoles as well as your PC, this is a very good value and surprisingly high quality piece of kit.

Verdict

»Overall Samsung proves that TN can be put to good use in a large monitor, though you still need to be aware of the limitations. Gamers looking for a cheap and pretty monitor could do far worse.

8

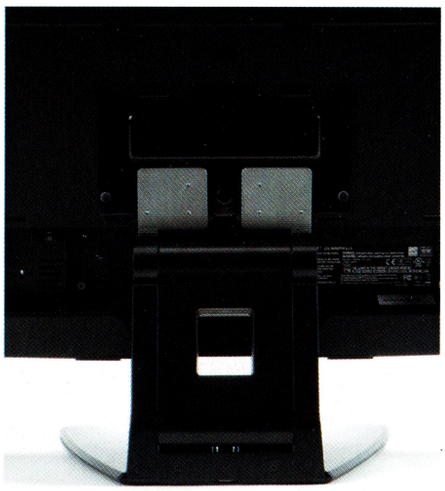


The NEC's connectivity options would easily allow users to connect an Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, Nintendo Wii and dedicated DVD player without the need for any adaptors. Oh, and it supports PCs, too!

The NEC's menus are easy to navigate thanks to four buttons and a D-pad, though we think most users will enjoy using the included comprehensive remote control even more

Head-to-head
The main features compared

Stand and mounting
» The NEC's stand is bulky and stiff, but it needs to be due of the screen's weight. Nevertheless, it still offers rotate, tilt and height adjustment options, though certainly not to the same degree as the Dell or Samsung offerings. Should you prefer to wall-mount the 24WMGX3, the stand can be unscrewed from the rear using a Philips screwdriver.



Connectivity and specifications
» The NEC has a wealth of connectivity options, sporting DVI, VGA, component, composite, S-video, and dual HDMI ports. It also has an optical audio output for connecting to a hi-fi. The NEC's specs are very good, with a 6ms response time, a 1000:1 contrast ratio and a brightness rating of 500cd/m2. The screen is also backed up by NEC's usual three-year warranty.

At over £600, the NEC will need to be spectacular to justify its price tag

£621

NEC MULTISYNC 24WMGX3 24"

Web Manufacturer: www.nec-display-solutions.co.uk Supplier: www.nec-display-solutions.co.uk

NEC is justifying the 24WMGX3's colossal price tag by describing it as a 'professional gaming monitor', but fortunately the screen is also full of innovative and unique features that we have yet to see anywhere else. Unlike the two screens we have talked about so far, the MultiSync uses an AMVA-based panel that was originally designed to be a compromise between TN and IPS-based technologies. MVA features viewing angles and colour performance competitive with S-IPS, while retaining the ultra-low lag characteristics of TN panels, which makes it a very sensible choice for a high-end gaming monitor.

Aesthetically the NEC looks superb, with a glossy piano black finish similar to the Samsung model. The lower bezel of the screen is certainly busier, however, with silver buttons and a directional pad prominently visible. The NEC screen follows the trend set by the manufacturer's previous efforts by being considerably thicker than most displays, and also by being very weighty. This necessitates a strong and bulky stand, though NEC has ensured it still looks smart by continuing the piano black finish here as well. The stand allows users to rotate the screen, adjust tilt angle and change the height, though there is no pivot offered.

When it comes to connectivity, the NEC is full of options. The screen has only single DVI and VGA ports on its underside, but along the left edge there is a component input suitable for Xbox owners along with two HDMI ports. Above the component ports you will also find S-Video and composite inputs, making the NEC suitable as a TV replacement (as long as you have satellite or cable). As you would expect for a monitor at this price, the menu system is extremely extensive, and among the options you will soon find the all-important aspect control. This allowed us to set a 1:1 mapping mode for the PlayStation 3, allowing for wonderful and undistorted gameplay. When it comes to image quality, the NEC was almost perfectly calibrated right out of the box and looks simply sensational. The colour performance is incredibly rich and vibrant, while the viewing angles provide undistorted views even at horizontal or vertical extremes. The panel also proved to be lightning-quick in our gaming tests, and exhibited the same lag and ghosting-free performance we normally reserve for TN panels. NEC has fitted the 24WMGX3 with a light sensor on the front that can adjust the screen's backlight strength dynamically based on the ambient lighting. Its effect can be increased or reduced based on your preference, though if using the screen nearer to a window than you'd prefer, it's a very useful feature.

While we are sure many people will be unable to justify spending double on the NEC compared to other options, none that we have seen offer its wealth of features, great image quality and peerless gaming performance in a single package. It may have a price tag to match, but this is the Ferrari of PC monitors.

Verdict

Overall A superlative screen that offers almost everything you could ever want in a gaming monitor. It's just a shame NEC has priced the 24WMGX3 out of the market for many.

8

Tipped by many as the favourite, can Dell bring home another award?

£358

DELL ULTRASHARP 2408WFP 24"

Web Manufacturer: www.dell.co.uk Supplier: www.chillblast.com

When we looked at the Dell 2408WFP in a recent standalone review we were very impressed by its wealth of features, its excellent image quality and attractive price point. For reasons that escape us, Dell has jacked up the price of the 2408WFP by over £25 since then, with further increases expected according to chillblast.com. Nevertheless, first impressions of the monitor were again impressive, with the understated aesthetics being attractive yet classy.

The 2408WFP's stand is of the same design as the model that shipped with its predecessor, and it is an excellent example, allowing tilt, pivot, rotation and significant height adjustments. The connectivity is right on the money as well, with a wealth of ports that equal even the NEC. Dual DVI ports are included along with a single HDMI, VGA, component, S-video, composite and even DisplayPort. Unfortunately, there are no standard phono audio inputs – or indeed speakers, making a dedicated sound system essential for console gamers. We doubt many will complain about this, however, as the image quality when using the analogue ports was disappointing to say the least, with a cropped and over-scanned output far from impressing us.

The Dell's image quality was outstanding, with rich and beautiful colours coming second only to the NEC's output. This wasn't true out of the box, however, with the 2408WFP's standard palette being skewed towards oversaturated reds and a brightness level that was uncomfortably high. This was simple to correct thanks to the Dell's intuitive menu system, easily accessible through the six buttons on the screen's front.

The display was far from perfect for gaming, though, with this particular 2408WFP showcasing alarming levels of output lag, which is the delay between the monitor receiving the image from the video card and actually displaying it. While our original review sample had some output lag, it wasn't especially noticeable and we dismissed it as no worse than most other screens. But in this sample it was bad enough to be felt in Windows, let alone when playing first-person shooters. A quick look at various online forums revealed this to be a common complaint, with some users experiencing no noticeable lag and others returning their monitors after finding them unusable. It seems that there are several revisions of the 2408WFP – some that are good and others that exhibit this problem. To see how bad the lag really was, we set up a dual-screen system and cloned the same display from the Dell onto a CRT. By running a stopwatch application and taking a photo of the two screens in the same frame, we revealed an output lag of over 65ms on this monitor, rendering it unsuitable for fast action shooters.

Overall, the Dell 2408WFP is a great monitor for general use thanks to its gorgeous image quality and excellent colour reproduction, but for gamers there seems to be some huge inconsistencies between individual samples. Some, like this model, exhibit horrendous levels of lag, while others like our original sample seem unaffected. Unfortunately, until Dell can fix these problems, we can't recommend the 2408WFP as a good screen for gamers.

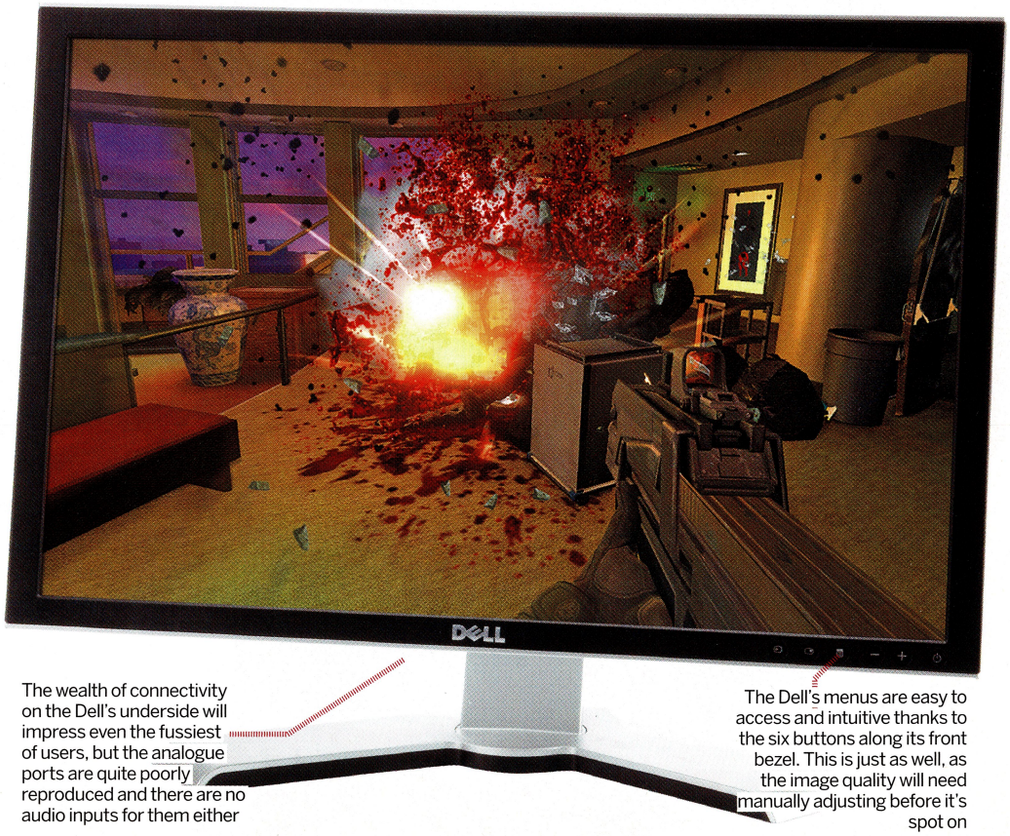
Verdict

Overall A great screen for the masses, but gamers will be playing output-lag Russian roulette if they opt for this monitor until Dell fixes the inconsistencies between batches. **7**

Head-to-head
The main features compared

Stand and mounting
» The Dell has an outstanding stand that matches Samsung's offering for flexibility. Tilt, pivot, rotate and height-adjustment are all supported, while the stand can be unclipped in seconds if you prefer to mount your displays on the wall. Dell has also integrated a USB hub and multi-format card reader into the 2408WFP, which photographers will certainly appreciate.

Connectivity and specifications
» With dual DVI, VGA, component, composite, S-video, HDMI and DisplayPort, the Dell leaves no boxes unchecked on the 2408WFP's connectivity list. A lack of speakers or audio inputs unfortunately means it's not as useful to console gamers as our other three contenders. The Dell's specs are very strong, with a 6ms response time, brightness of 450cd/m2 and a contrast ratio of 1300:1.



The wealth of connectivity on the Dell's underside will impress even the fussiest of users, but the analogue ports are quite poorly reproduced and there are no audio inputs for them either

The Dell's menus are easy to access and intuitive thanks to the six buttons along its front bezel. This is just as well, as the image quality will need manually adjusting before it's spot on

Tech specs Compare and contrast the specifications, technical information and verdicts

Contender and price	Panel	DVI/HDMI/VGA	Speakers	Other inputs	DESIGN	FEATURES	VALUE	OVERALL
£326 Asus MK241	TN	1/1/1	Yes	None	**4** The Asus monitor doesn't have the best of looks, and the stand is limited to just tilt. The image quality was very poor overall. Asus needs to drastically improve to keep up.	**6** With a webcam, mic, speakers and HDMI among others, the Asus has plenty of extras to offer, but it gets the basics all wrong.	**5** The Asus may be cheap for a 24-inch monitor, but you would be much better off buying something smaller and better.	5
£307 Samsung SM-2493HM	TN	1/1/1	Yes	None	**9** The Samsung's stand and general aesthetics are absolutely wonderful, and the image quality pretty decent for a TN screen. A great effort from Samsung.	**7** The Samsung lacks extras aside from those provided by the stand, and the lack of 1:1 aspect ruins its HDMI abilities. Console owners should look elsewhere.	**9** For £300 the Samsung is a lot of screen, and its quality, though not the best, is great for your fast action gaming.	8
£621 NEC MultiSync WMGX3	AMVA	1/2/1	Yes	Component, composite, s-video, audio	**9** The NEC's stand is reasonably feature-rich and the general aesthetics are quite superb, but the NEC really wins on its amazing quality.	**10** Dedicated audio inputs, huge connectivity options, an ambient light sensor – the list goes on and on. And that quality...	**7** There's no doubting that the NEC is expensive, but with all of its extras it does justify them. It's just a shame more can't afford it.	8
£358 Dell UltraSharp 2408WFP	SPVA	2/1/1	No	Component, composite, s-video, Displayport	**7** Great looks, lots of options and great image quality, but this model had awful output lag, ruining it for gamers. It doesn't affect all models, but it's too big a risk to take.	**8** The Dell has a huge array of connectivity options and its stand is also equal-best with the Samsung. It does lack speakers, though.	**7** The Dell is well priced for an SPVA panel, and its image quality is great. The output lag is unacceptable for a screen of this price.	7

TOTAL PCGaming GROUP TEST WINNER

AND THE WINNER IS...

NEC MultiSync 24WMGX3

Standout feature

Outstanding image quality

»While all of the extras the NEC packs in are a nice bonus, it was the quality of the output that won it this group test. The colour reproduction, viewing angles and vibrancy were among the best we have ever seen, yet this didn't hamper the monitor's gaming ability at all. Even when tasked with the quickest of shooters, the screen remained lightning fast, with no visible ghosting or lag whatsoever. If you have £600 burning a hole in your bank account, we can think of few better ways to spend it.

We started this group test practically ruling out the NEC due to its huge price tag, but using the screen was such a joy that it managed to win us over. Touches like analogue ports that work properly, a remote control, ambient light sensor and built-in dedicated audio inputs are genuinely innovative features for a PC screen and normally only appear on televisions. Naturally, the NEC is a significant investment, and those who can't quite stretch to its vast price tag can rest easy in the knowledge that the Samsung alternative still provides great results for gaming and costs half as much.

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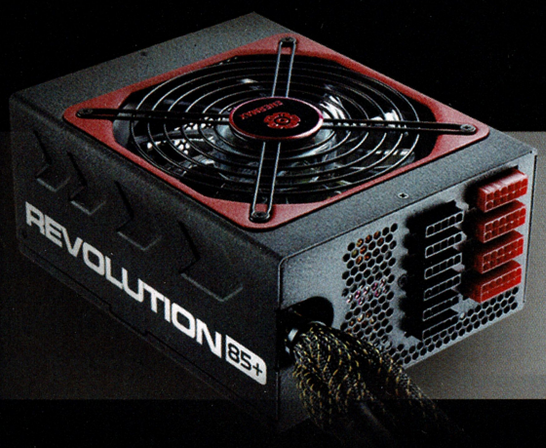

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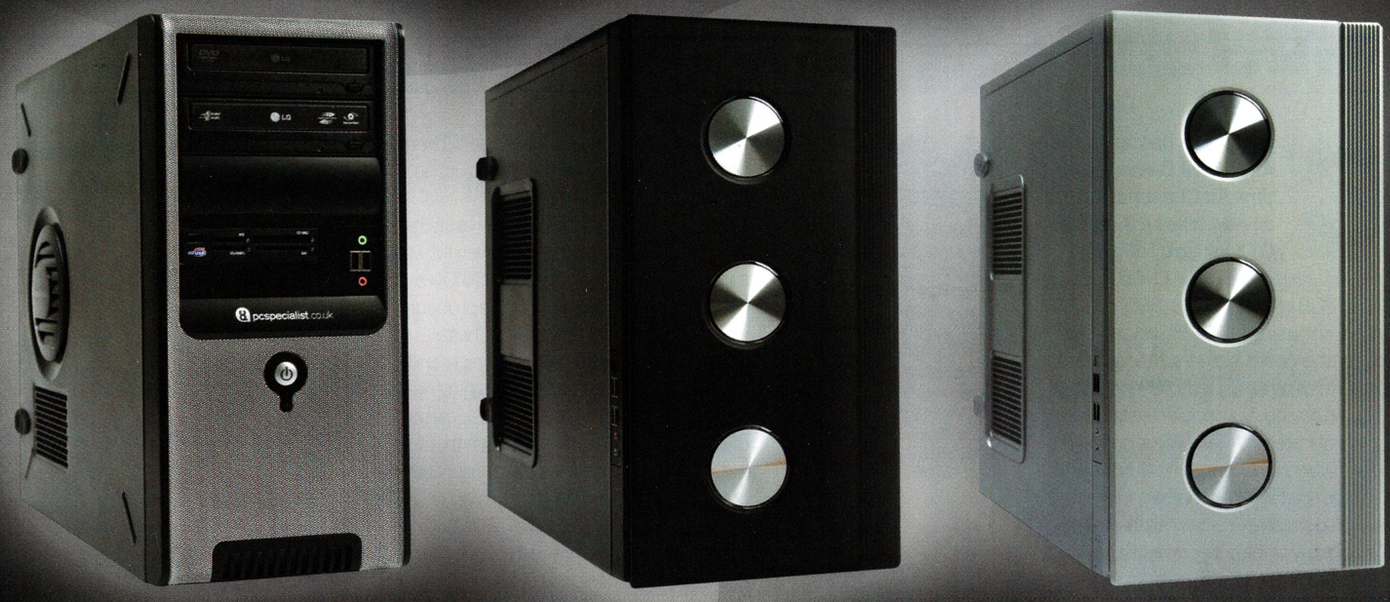

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Pros An affordable SLI system with a very healthy overclock

Cons Quad-core would have been welcome, as would higher-end cards for SLI

Cyberpower has updated its popular Gamer line in time for Christmas with an all-new take on the Infinity GTX variant. The older model featured a Core 2 Duo E8400 running at 3GHz, 4GB of DDR2 6400 (800MHz) memory and a single GTX280 on an SLI-ready motherboard featuring Nvidia's 750i chipset. Retailing at around £989 including VAT, it was obviously a popular system with the gaming fraternity. This time around, though, Cyberpower are going all out, by upping the spec where it matters without causing too much extra harm to the wallet.

While many of the core components that make up the backbone of the older system remain much the same, the E8400 CPU has been replaced with the slightly meatier E8500. Not a massive upgrade by any stretch of the imagination, but that's not taking into account the mammoth overclock imposed on it. 4GHz right out of the box is impressive stuff, helped along quite nicely by Asus' clever closed loop, small form factor water cooling block that exhausts straight out the rear of the case via a single 120mm radiator block and fan. No topping up, no maintenance and its quiet, too.

Still, quiet computing isn't the result that Cyberpower is angling for, and even if it was, triple SLI using three 55nm 9800GTX+s certainly wouldn't help. While we probably would have preferred straight SLI with two 280GTXs, those looking for high-end hardware and some serious bragging rights will certainly appreciate what these cards offer when you strap a few of them together.

On the whole, it makes mince meat out of our testing suite. Compared to issue 11's £1,499 SCUDO GI-01 (with a 3GHz Core 2 Quad and a HD4870), it certainly performs admirably at a considerably lower price point. As the benchmarks show, both PC and 3D Marks are stronger and *Crysis* gets a boost. That said, it's not top scores all round.

Since Cyberpower has opted for a dual instead of quad-core, its computational power isn't quite up to scratch, despite the breakneck clock speeds on offer. Super Prime takes a hit as a result, and had the SCUDO been tested with CineBench it almost certainly would have taken first place there, too. There's also the small matter of SLI's still rather limited support. Not all games respond well to dual card setups (let alone rigs with three or four GPUs) – something clearly demonstrated in our *Company Of Heroes* test. If anything, triple SLI seems to hinder rather than help.

You can't win them all, though, and for our money the Gamer Infinity wins where it matters. As long as you're willing to take the rough with the smooth, we have no qualms in offering it a very healthy score for its troubles.

Russell Barnes

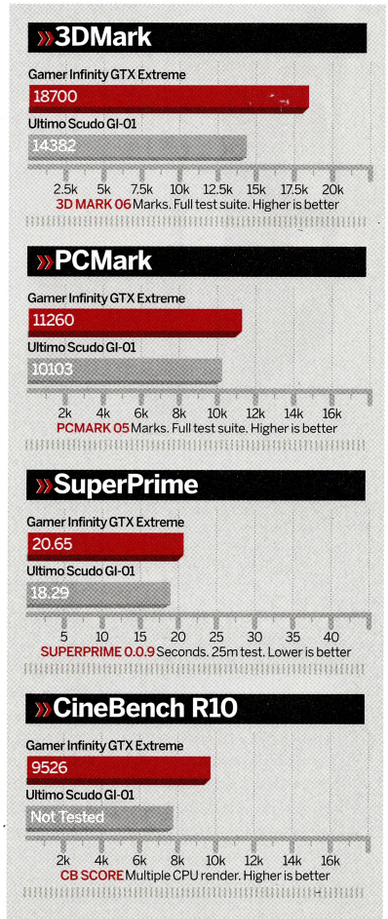
Tech specs

- **CPU:** E8500 @ 4.05GHz
- **RAM:** 4GB PC26400 800MHz DDR2 RAM
- **MOTHERBOARD** EVGA nForce 780i motherboard
- **GRAPHICS:** 3x 9800GTX+
- **HDD:** 500GB Samsung HDD
- **PSU:** 780w Hiper PSU
- **OS:** Vista Home Premium (64-bit)

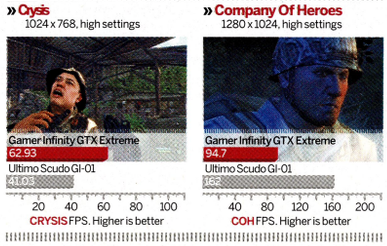
The NZXT Tempest case is roomy and cool. Good job too considering what's inside

The triple SLI setup can prove incredibly impressive, but not all games can put it to use

Benchmarks performance



In-game performance playtested



Verdict

Performance	Excellent performance where it matters most	8
Design	Good choice of components, and the Asus water cooler is a fine touch	8
Features	A large overclock and triple SLI makes this model particularly feature rich	8
Value	More expensive than its predecessor, but it's still good value	7
Overall	A great high-end gamer system that's thoughtfully laid out. An ideal Christmas present for yourself!	8

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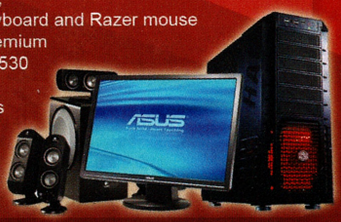

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In three words **Simple. Small. Satisfying.**

ARBICO OC GTX280

£899

Arbico proves that honest horsepower and simple design can go a long way in PC gaming

Web Manufacturer www.arbico.co.uk
Supplier www.arbico.co.uk

Pros A no-frills approach that keeps cost down without affecting performance

Cons A 45nm quad-core at 3.6 or 3.8GHz would have put this rig in a league of its own

Not only is this the first time we've seen an Arbico system in the TPCG labs, its also the first time we've encountered an Xclio Coolbox enclosure. Having not seen the case before, we were keen to investigate, and we were happy with what we saw. While very much by the numbers and no-frills, its classic cooling design using oversized front and side 180mm fans (with a 120mm model exhausting air from the rear) does a great job of keeping the system cool. It's far from the quietest case we've seen, but its simplicity has a certain elegance that belies its affordability. The front panel and custom drive bays are rubberised (to surprisingly nice effect) and it sports a couple of USB 2.0 ports on the bezel.

Once we'd run through our battery of system tests and benchmarks, it quickly became apparent that what's true of the case is also true of the system. While it doesn't do anything particularly extraordinary, what it does do it does impressively well. The CPU overclock isn't quite up to that of the Cyberpower system on page 104, but achieving a stable 3.8GHz on air (courtesy of a Scythe Katana 2 heatsink and fan combo) is pretty impressive nonetheless.

The Gigabyte P35 motherboard isn't the newest of the most feature-rich available (it's actually one of the original 'star performers' back from the birth of the Core 2 Duo), but it's a stable workhorse that helps permit the excellent overclock and enables the DDR2 RAM to churn out an impressive 1066MHz without breaking a sweat. While it doesn't make all the difference, the faster RAM on offer here (compared to the Cyberpower Gamer Infinity GTX) certainly helps make up for the slower clock speeds in the benchmarks and Super Prime tests.

That said, with an affordable quad-core overclocked to similar speeds, it would have done much to counter slightly off-target Super Prime scores as demonstrated by the Chillblast Fusion Jaguar. Still, unless you're hell-bent on number crunching, the Arbico does excellently, especially in the gaming benchmarks.

That's largely thanks to the 1GB Nvidia GTX280 taking care of graphics. We're pleased to note that Arbico's more affordable system nearly matches Cyberpower for *Crysis*, while perfectly demonstrating the limitations of SLI by blowing it away on *Company Of Heroes*. 245fps is quite a feat for an £899 system, and proof that simplicity can prove advantageous.

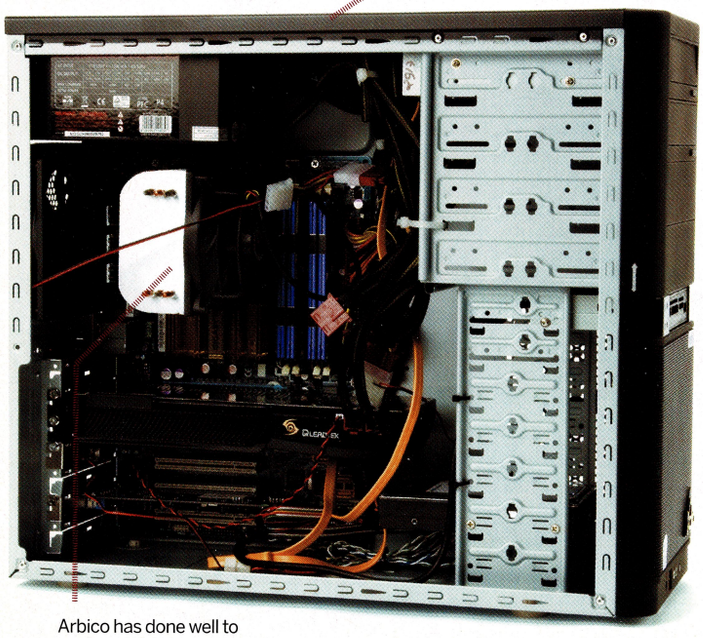
With the added bonus of a Creative Labs Xtreme Audio card (it's actually quite rare to see a third-party solution on system builds at this end of the price bracket), it's almost the ideal mid-range gamer system.

Russell Barnes

Tech specs

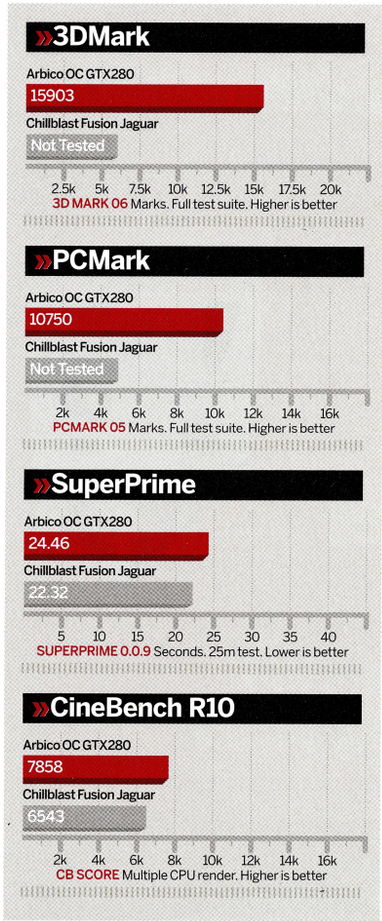
- **CPU:** E8500 @ 3.8GHz
- **RAM:** 4GB PC8500 1066MHz DDR2 RAM
- **MOTHERBOARD:** Gigabyte GA-P35-DS3 motherboard
- **GRAPHICS:** GTX 280 1GB
- **HDD:** 750GB SATA HDD
- **OPTICAL DRIVE:** 22x dual-layer SATA
- **EXTRA:** Multimedia card reader
- **SOUND:** Creative Labs X-Fi Xtreme Audio
- **OS:** Windows XP Home or Vista Home Premium (32 or 64-bit)

The oversized 180mm fan isn't quiet, but it makes short work of the system's cooling requirements

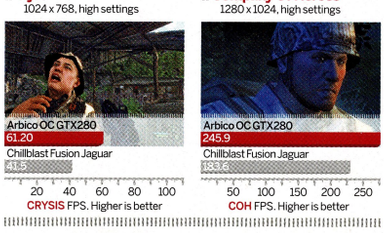


Arbico has done well to keep its 3.8GHz overclock stable on air cooling

Benchmarks performance



In-game performance playtested



Verdict

- **Performance** A solid effort in system tests, and a great performance in Crysis — 8
- **Design** It's a very basic design, but its simplicity serves it well — 7
- **Features** Great components, descrete audio and a multi-card reader — 8
- **Value** Intelligently selected components means Arbico has kept cost down — 8
- **Overall** Mid-range gamers should look no further than the Arbico OC GTX280 for great bang for their buck. — 8

akasa

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In three words **Cheap. Not. Cheerful.**

PALICOMP PHOENIX E8GTX

£599

Palicomp treads the tricky line between price and performance with its latest budget build

Web Manufacturer www.palicomp.co.uk
Supplier www.palicomp.co.uk

Pros Room for an SLI upgrade, extra RAM and overclocking with another cooler

Cons Poor choice of graphics card and some cheap component choices let it down

A budget system doesn't just require a very careful balance between price and performance, it requires the system builder to invest its money carefully into the right components in the right places. Unfortunately, Palicomp hasn't quite got the balance right. An early mistake on its part was choosing the pitiful Wi20A Wizard series case. While we fully expect a relatively cheap case on a budget build like this, the case on offer is about as cheap and tacky as we've ever encountered. It has a pair of useless 'flaps' on the front that do nothing other than hinder the disk tray on the optical drive, and while the giant side fan does do a good job of moving air into the system (along with the standard 120mm front intake fan), Palicomp hasn't fitted a rear exhaust fan as standard, and is only offering it as an added extra at the time of purchase.

If you remove the side panel and look into the system itself, then you'll find a relatively well-built rig running off an ASRock SLI-able backbone. It's tidy and clean, but the Intel stock cooler for the E8500 pretty much rules out overclocking. This is a shame since a pre-overclock would have been very welcome and, as our other systems this month clearly demonstrate, this popular CPU is easily capable of 3.8GHz on air and 4GHz+ on water.

The vanilla GTX 260 (the older 196 stream processor model to be precise) takes care of graphics reasonably well and just about holds its own in our benchmark tests (providing a playable frame rate in *Crysis* and performing well in 3DMark 06). That said, Palicomp would have been wiser to provide the newer model of the card, or better yet, gone with the more affordable HD4870. ATI's card is cheaper and faster in most instances and is currently the card of choice for the majority of serious gamers. While they could have stuck with the cheap and cheerful ASRock motherboard, a CrossFire-compatible board would also work better if that was the case.

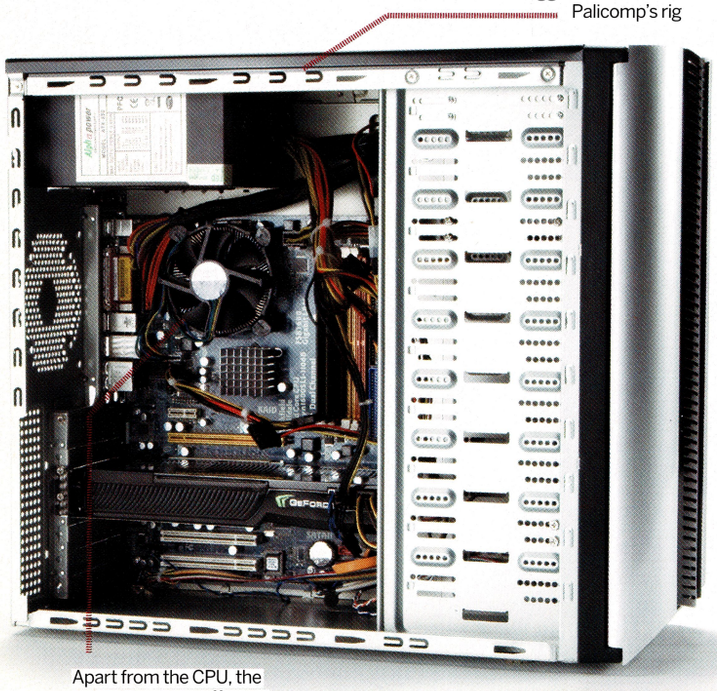
These changes coupled with a decent third-party cooler and factory overclock would have given this system a massive boost in performance and kudos without affecting the price of the system (or, for that matter, Palicomp's bottom line).

All that said, however, it does perform well in testing, with only Cinebench and Super Prime being its downfalls. What this translates to is its unsuitability for advanced 3D and number crunching, which probably aren't the primary concerns for the budget-conscious PC gamer, anyway.

Russell Barnes

Tech specs

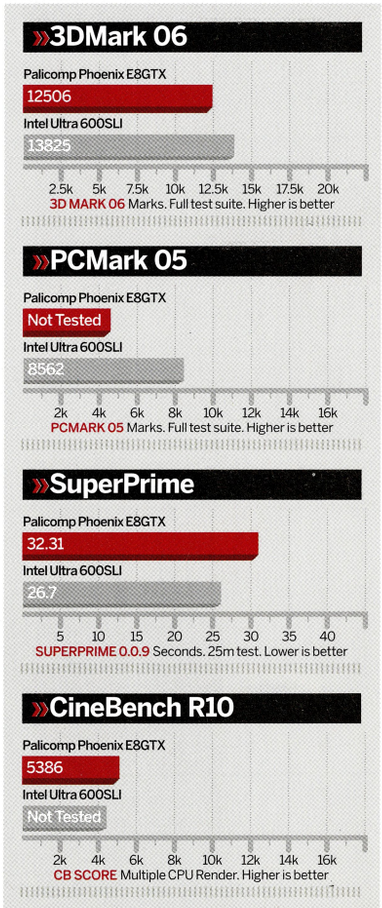
- **CPU:** Intel Core 2 Duo E8500 @ 3.16GHz
- **RAM:** 4GB Samsung PC26400
- **MOTHERBOARD:** AsRock Penryn 1600SLI-110DB
- **GRAPHICS:** Nvidia GTX260 896MB
- **HDD:** Maxtor 500GB SATA
- **OPTICAL DRIVE:** Sony 20x DVD-RW with Lightscribe
- **OS:** Vista Home Premium 64-bit



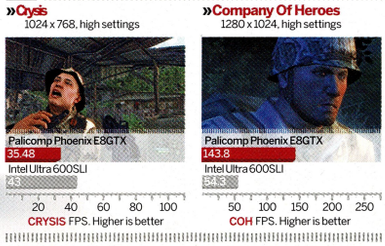
The Wizard series case is probably the biggest drawback of Palicomp's rig

Apart from the CPU, the components on offer are far from prime picks

Benchmarks performance



In-game performance playtested



Verdict

- **Performance** Despite using an older GTX260, the system holds its own — 7
- **Design** Some terrible component choices don't get things off on the right foot — 6
- **Features** No factory overclocking or third-party cooler will leave you wanting — 6
- **Value** Palicomp probably takes a big bottom line, but it's a capable build for the price — 7
- **Overall** If you're looking for a cheap Christmas rig, you could do worse than the Palicomp Phoenix. — 7

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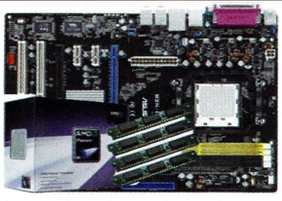

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In three words **Industrial. Cooling. Power.**

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COOLER MASTER HAF 932 PC CASE

Industrial looks and incredible cooling potential are the HAF's standout features

Web Manufacturer: www.coolermaster.com Supplier: www.coolermaster.com

Cooler Master already offers a great steel case for gamers in the form of its CM-690. With comprehensive cooling, plenty of space and understated good looks, it's one of our favourite chassis – especially given the sub-£60 price tag. At more than twice that price, the HAF 932 is obviously targeting the high-end user, and has a host of unique features that will appeal to the PC enthusiast. HAF stands for High Air Flow, and this case is certainly true to its name – we've never seen anything with this much cooling potential. As standard, the HAF has no fewer than three gigantic 230mm fans; two of which exhaust from the top and side panels, with the third acting as an intake. There is also a 140mm fan on the rear panel, which although tiny in comparison, is still larger than the standard 120mm models we normally see.

We had our earmuffs at the ready when powering up the HAF for the first time, but fortunately Cooler Master has shown great restraint with their case fans' rotational speed. The big units spin at just 700rpm, while the 140mm fan was also very quiet. This didn't stop the case from easily providing the best cooling we have ever seen, with internal case temperatures lower than even the Antec Twelve Hundred and Cosmos S. If you feel the need for yet more cooling power, the HAF has a dizzying array of extra fan mounts, though we can't think of any reason you would need to increase its standard complement.

As well as good cooling, the HAF 932 offers tool-less installation for hard and optical disk drives, of which it supports five and six respectively. There is also a little flap on the top of the case that allows bay reservoirs to be topped up without further inconvenience. Further features for water coolers include native mounts for radiators and external holes for tubing. While these won't be features that appeal to the masses, the HAF is hardly aimed at the beige-box brigade. Although the motherboard tray is non-removable, Cooler Master has cut a big hole in the back of it. This provides the board with some extra breathing room, but it also allows large CPU coolers to be installed without the need to remove the board first.

The HAF provides excellent connectivity options, with the case allowing for four USB ports, a FireWire port and also a cable that converts one of your motherboard's standard SATA connectors into an eSATA port. There are also audio connectors for headphones and a mic, and all are easily accessible from the front. While the HAF 932 is a tour de force of ingenuity, cooling and performance, it's hardly the Kate Moss of PC cases. Its rugged, industrial looks will certainly put many off, but after a few weeks of getting used to it, we would happily give this military-inspired hulk a home next to our collection of machetes, M16 Carbines and *Rambo* DVDs.

Ian Jackson

Verdict

A highly innovative case with rugged looks that we think many will grow to like.

8

Tech specs

- **COOLING:** Three 230mm fans, 140mm exhaust fan, water cooling fill port
- **PSU:** Top or bottom-mounted PSU
- **MOTHERBOARD:** Accommodates eATX boards
- **DRIVE BAYS:** Five hard drives, six optical drives

TOTAL PCGaming EDITOR'S CHOICE

£130

The master of high-end memory turns up the heat with its latest DDR3 offering...

MUSHKIN 4GB HP3-10666 DDR3 KIT

Tech spec

- 1333 MHz speed
- Aluminium heat spreaders
- 1.8V operating voltage
- 7-7-7-20 timings

Web www.mushkin.co.uk

Mushkin is one of the oldest performance memory manufacturers around, with a history that goes back to the early Nineties. It was the first company to fit its memory with heat spreaders, and also one of the earliest to offer sticks rated to a speed faster than the ordinary JEDEC-approved standards. This particular kit offers 4GB of ultra-quick DDR3 operating at 1333MHz. While this isn't as fast as 1600MHz kits we have looked at previously, it has 7-7-7-20 timings that are quite tight for DDR3, and is available at a reasonable price.

Installing the memory in our Asus P5E3 Premium test rig proved to be as simple as plugging the modules in and pressing the power button, with the kit's SPD chip taking care of the rest. With an operating voltage of 1.7-1.8V, the Mushkin memory modules remained cool throughout our tests, and we never detected even a hint of instability. By raising the voltage to 1.9V and slackening off the timings, we were able to take these modules all the way up to 1660MHz – highly impressive for PC3-10666-rated RAM. At these speeds they provided some of the fastest benchmark scores we have ever seen in the Sisoft Sandra and Everest benchmarks.

With their metallic navy blue heat spreaders, these modules certainly look the part and are refreshingly different from most memory sticks. Our testing also proved them to be highly overclockable, making them perfect for tweakers who are after a memory solution that won't be obsolete as soon as Nehalem is finally released.

Verdict

Solid DDR3 memory with good looks and a reassuring lifetime warranty.

9

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VERBATIM RAPIER V2 GAMING MOUSE

£35

An unlikely success in gaming from the masters of blank discs...

Web Manufacturer: verbatim-europe.co.uk
Supplier: verbatim-europe.co.uk

When talking about high-end programmable mice, Verbatim isn't the first name that would usually spring to mind. Known largely for its recordable storage media, the company has taken a massive leap into the highly competitive world of gaming. Verbatim has actually launched two mice in the Rapier range – the V1 and V2. The version we have here is the slightly more 'normal' Rapier, on account of it looking more like a mouse than a prop from *Star Trek*.

The V2 might not be the best looking pointer we've seen, but it feels comfortable and all the function keys are logically placed. Included in the kit is a weight pack designed to give you the perfect feel according to your preferences and a reversible base – one side very smooth and fast, the other offering a little more friction.

Probably most impressive of all, though, are the incredible specs 'under the hood'. Capable of tracking up to 40 inches of movement per second (that's a staggering 9600fps in gaming terms) the Rapier V2 has an on-the-fly tweakable resolution range of 800 to 3200dpi, and boasts a staggering seven fully programmable buttons easily set up via included software. The icing on the cake, however, is its ability to store macros on the mouse itself – take it to another PC and your macros are still intact. Genius.

Russell Barnes

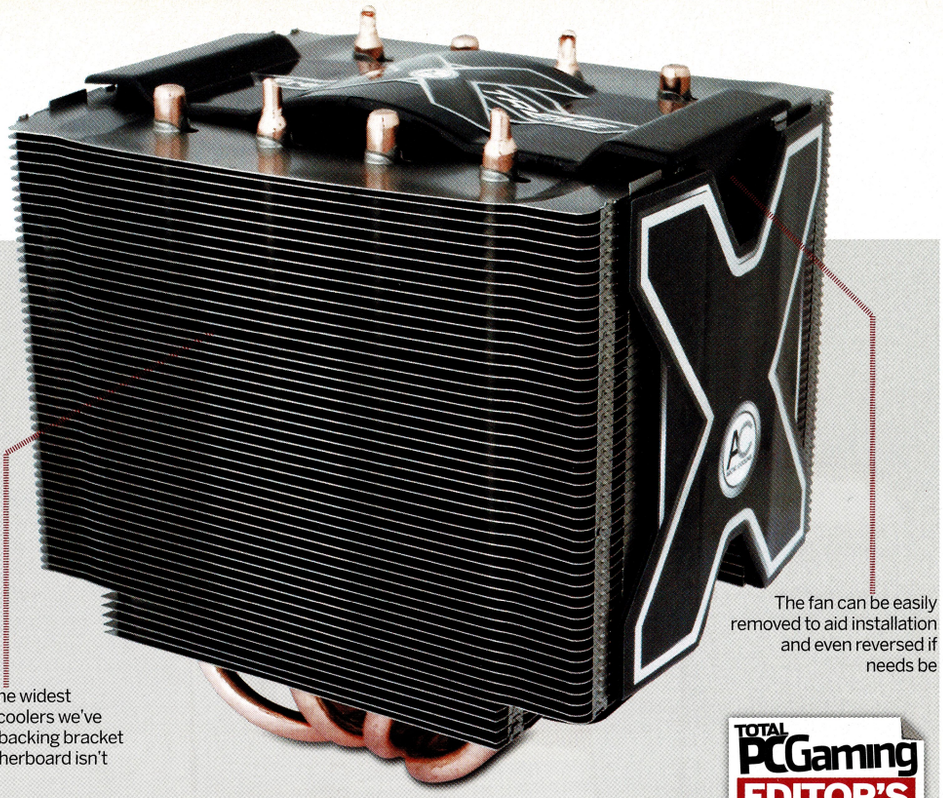
Verdict

8

Not the sexiest mouse in the world, but packed with top-notch functionality.

Tech specs

- 800-3200 dpi
- 20Gs acceleration
- Eight buttons
- Seven programmable buttons
- Dimensions: 120mm(L) x 74mm(W) x 42mm(H)
- 167 grams
- Weight pack included



It's one of the widest and tallest coolers we've seen, yet a backing bracket for the motherboard isn't required

The fan can be easily removed to aid installation and even reversed if needs be

TOTAL PCGaming EDITOR'S CHOICE

In three words **Big. Bad. Cold.**

ARCTIC COOLING FREEZER XTREME

£24.68

Arctic Cooling reveals its biggest ever cooler, but just how 'Xtreme' is the performance?

Web Manufacturer: www.arctic-cooling.com Supplier: www.laptopsandpcs.com

Tech specs

- **DIMENSIONS:** 130mm(L) x 100mm(W) x 131mm(H)
- **WEIGHT:** 608g
- 800 – 1500 RPM fan speed
- 160 Watt dissipation
- 102-fin heat sink design
- Ultra-quiet 120mm fan
- Pre-applied MX-2
- Six years warranty

It's rare we get excited about anything less glamorous than next-generation CPU architecture or a high-end graphics card, but when Arctic Cooling waved its new flagship CPU cooler under our nose we couldn't help but grab at it with both hands. Third-party coolers might be ten a penny, but when the maker of the ultimate thermal compound, and the cheapest and most effective cooler on the market today (Freezer Pro) call its product Xtreme, you can be pretty sure it'll live up to it.

And it does just that, by using two enormous tower coolers spiked with four heat-pipes with an ultra-quiet 120mm fan sandwiched between them. Interestingly, it's possible to unclip and entirely remove the fan from the cooling mount allowing easy access for fitting, cleaning and even reversing the fan direction as desired.

The surface area on this thing is immense and is one of the widest and weightiest coolers we've ever seen. Despite there being the small possibility of obstruction depending on the design of your motherboard's northbridge cooler, it's quite remarkable the way in which AC has managed to avoid the need for a ridiculous support structure to keep it in one place. Usually this kind of tower cooler requires the motherboard to be removed for a support backing plate to be fitted, but somehow AC has found a way to avoid this, despite a massive 102 fins weighing over half a kilogram!

So how does it perform? It's arguably the best cooler we've ever played with, and at under £25, AC has well and truly cemented its place as one of the leading manufacturers of PC cooling gear. The 'push and pull' of the fan drawing air through one set of fins to then push it out through the other is massively effective, and when temps are low (which they will be unless you've overclocking) it's also silent. Amazing.

Standout feature

Comfort

» The Freezer Xtreme comes complete with MX2 thermal paste pre-applied. It's no Arctic Silver 5, but it's still better than most solutions on the market.

Verdict

9

With cooling performance capable of dissipating 160W, AC is onto another winner.

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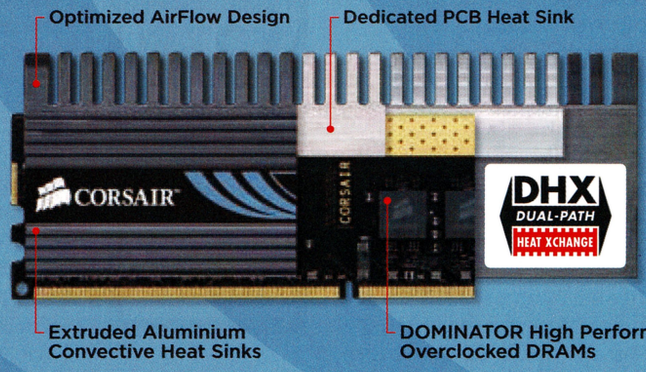

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MSI RADEON R4670 512MB

£59

After the GeForce 9500GT failed to impress us, does ATI's new budget chip have what it takes?

Web Manufacturer: www.giga-byte.com
Supplier: www.giga-byte.com

Pros It's whisper-quiet, runs quickly and won't harm your wallet

Cons You won't be playing *Crysis* on High settings

While it's always fun to salivate over the latest flagship graphical juggernauts, the vast majority of gamers can't justify spending more than Gordon Brown's bailout bill on a video card. We were fully mindful of this fact when reviewing the GeForce 9500GT a few issues ago, but the card's frankly appalling performance in recent blockbusters ruled it out as a realistic choice for even the thriftiest of gamers. This month we have AMD's attempt at conquering the entry-level market with the £59 Radeon 4670. The foundations of the card are excellent, as it has the same DirectX 10.1-supporting architecture of the award-winning 4800 series. Raw power has obviously been substantially reduced, with the number of shader processors being cut to 320 and the memory bandwidth limited to 128 bits. You still get 512MB of memory, however, which will be plenty for a while yet.

One of the first things to strike us about the 4670 was its diminutive size, which will be more than dinky enough to fit in even the most constricting of cases – small-form-factor Shuttle systems included. Its power requirements are also very low and with no external PCI-Express power required, even a PSU bundled with a £25 case will be up to the job. MSI has fitted its version of the 4670 with a sizable aluminium cooler, but it's very quiet and can be controlled manually from ATI's driver if you wish to subdue it even further.

A 20 or 22-inch monitor is the sweet spot for PC gamers these days, and we expect gaming video cards to be able to run at this resolution with modern titles, even if the detail levels need to be reduced a little. Fortunately, the 4670 was more than up to the task, with the card breezing through our *Crysis* benchmark at Medium detail at a fully playable 37fps. Other less-demanding titles even ran well with the settings maxed out, and across the spectrum of our benchmarks the Radeon was often twice as quick as the 9500GT, which costs a similar amount of money.

As with its more-expensive Radeon brothers, the 4670 has a built-in audio processor. This allows you to output both video and audio over HDMI, making this card an excellent choice for those who want to use their system as a media centre. MSI includes an adaptor for this very purpose, as well as a VGA dongle. Elsewhere, the bundle is quite light, though for a card costing so little, this is perfectly acceptable.

Although by spending just a little more cash you can pick up a GeForce 9600GT or Radeon 4830, the Radeon 4670 is still an exceptional card for the masses, and will allow you to play even the most demanding titles on a 22-inch screen. Obviously you won't be able to max out all of the image quality settings, but for under £60 this is just the ticket for giving an aging PC some much-needed gaming grunt.

Ian Jackson

Tech specs

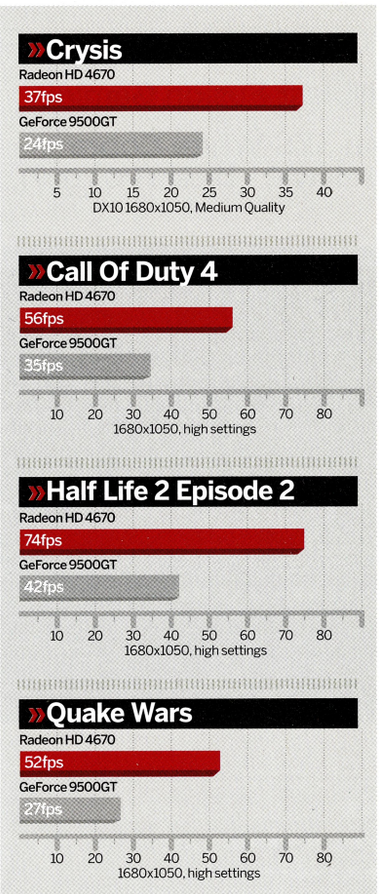
- **STREAM PROCESSORS** 320
- **GPU CORE CLOCK** 750MHz
- **MEMORY** 512MB of 2000MHz GDDR3
- **MEMORY INTERFACE** 128-bit
- **TRANSISTORS** 514 million

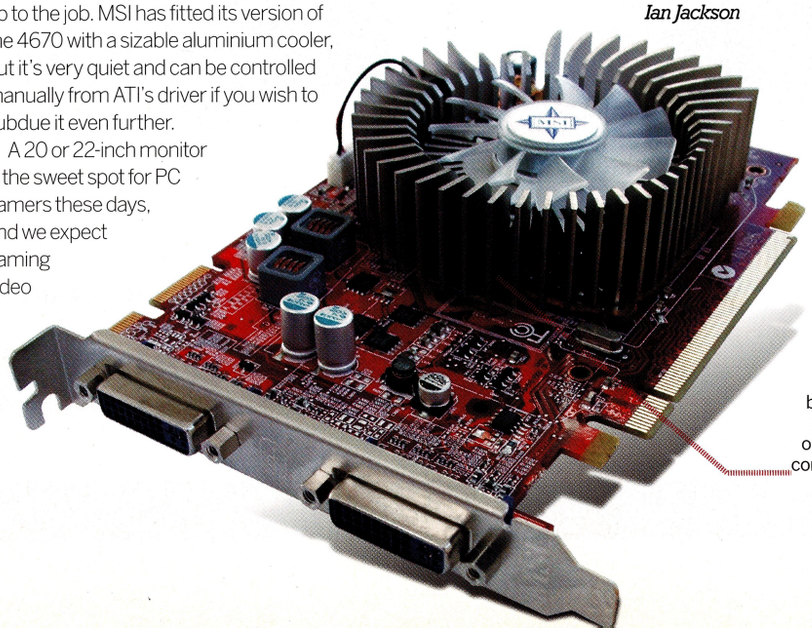
Standout feature

CrossFire

As with all current Radeon cards, two 4670s can be combined in a CrossFire configuration. Although this may provide to up to twice the performance in optimal situations, we rarely find two entry-level cards perform better than a single mid-ranged option costing the same.

In-game performance





The MSI's cooler may look big and brutish, but the 4670 runs very cool and therefore operates quietly. You can also control the fan speed manually within the Catalyst Control Centre providing you have driver version 8.10 or newer.

Verdict

Performance	For a card so cheap, performance is surprisingly punchy	7
Design	A simple PCB that will be small enough to fit in all cases. Quiet, too	8
Features	The 4670 is just as feature-rich as the 4870, including DX10.1 support	9
Value	You can get the 4670 for less than £60 – a lot of card for not much money	8
Overall	The best card available for gamers on the tightest budget, the 4670 is a great addition to the Radeon range.	8

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Web Manufacturer: www.razerzone.com
Supplier: www.razerzone.com

Pros Easy to setup and use, excellent sound quality and design

Cons Unresponsive control, needs lots of desk space, weak and muffled bass

It's not often tested products are actually breathtaking. Razer has struck gold in their second step outside of typical gaming peripherals by creating an extravagant speaker system of the highest quality.

The Razer Mako 2.1 Advanced Desktop Audio System is made for gamers and audiophiles alike, and is meant to provide the best possible sound quality for the typical desktop. Knowing full well surround setups are still few and far between for most PC gamers, Razer designed the Mako to shoot sound out through the bottom of the satellites and in every direction, creating a fuller, richer audio experience.

The surface the Mako sits on also makes a slight impact. An oak table sounded clearer than a standard plastic cover, and the bass has more kick when closer to a hard surface. It's not enough to make a dramatic difference, though.

Jet black with the THX logo stamped on the front, the two satellites look like they come straight from space, and will complement whatever tabletop they sit on. Connecting to the subwoofer through specialised thin Ethernet cables works with the ease-of-use that the Mako readily employs. Setting up the speakers is simple: plug them in and you're good to go. There's no need to distance the satellites away from each other because there is no sweet spot. So long as they have the required space to blast audio, placement is to your heart's desire.

Standout feature

Omni-directional

» The omni-directional satellite speakers blast air in every direction, making realistic 360 degree sound. Place the speakers however you please, and the sound will remain almost identical everywhere.

Tech specs

» **CONFIGURATION:** 2.1
» **REMOTE:** Wired
» **TOTAL POWER:** 300
» THX-certified quality and performance
» 3.5mm auxiliary input minijack
» 3.5mm headphone minijack
» RCA audio input

TOTAL PCGaming EDITOR'S CHOICE

The blue-lit control pod is just as fashionable as the speakers

Even with its size and power requirements, the giant subwoofer has a slightly muffled bass

Because of the unique design, it's recommended that at least six to twelve centimetres around each speaker be completely clear so the sound can travel without obstruction. Those of us with more cluttered desks will be thankful cleanliness is a requirement.

The subwoofer is a large version of the satellites, another orb roughly three times larger and heavier. The back contains a simple outline of the available inputs and works identically to the satellites. It's recommended to keep the woofer under the table, mainly because it can shake entire tabletops with little abandon. What is disappointing is the muffled bass at low frequencies, which is odd considering how much power is available to the woofer.

All of this is controlled by a touch-sensitive control pod, which powers the device on and off, sets the volume and bass using an arc adjust panel, switches between lines 1 and 2, mutes the volume and provides inputs for headphones or an additional line in. Sadly, the control pod suffers from insensitivity and often has trouble adjusting the volume properly.

The Razer Mako withstood every test we threw at it. It gets violently loud with the control pod lit in a warning red, but that did no damage (except to our hearing). It's almost everything PC speakers should be: stylish, powerful and an utter pleasure to use. It just needs cleaner bass.

James Pikover

Verdict

» **Performance** There's no stress it can't handle, though the bass is muffled — 9
» **Design** Orb speakers and subwoofer, all jet black with a beautiful light-up control pad — 10
» **Features** Enough inputs to use for a media centre and a touch-sensitive control panel — 9
» **Value** They're expensive, but you get your money's worth — 9
» **Overall** The Mako's are almost remarkable. The small speakers boast both high quality audio and design. — 9

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SITECOM 300N XR GIGABIT ROUTER

£109.99

A gaming router? It sounds as moody as the left-handed hammer, but Sitecom could be onto something here

Web Manufacturer: www.gaming-router.com
Supplier: www.sitecom.com

Pros A greased lightning-fast router for wireless fanatics

Cons Not a brilliant option for ADSL users

Speed and reliability: arguably the two most crucial aspects of anything internet-hardware related, but particularly when it comes to routers. The average PC user can get away with a bog-standard wireless setup, but PC gamers serious about taking their hobby online had better think hard spending money in this department to eliminate any potential bottleneck from their networking hardware.

Sitecom's solution is the WL-308 300N XR Gaming Router – a name that's sure to make the inexperienced question what it is that makes their current setup without the same superlative inadequate for gaming. It probably isn't, but it is worth considering that the 300N XR has the raw stats and a couple of features that could make a marked improvement to your online gaming performance.

The featured Gigabit Ethernet and wireless N standard are a given for any router worth its salt these days, but the highlights of the 300N XR are an integrated firewall that automatically opens available ports for any game it recognises, plus Sitecom's StreamEngine technology. This tech could be a happy solution to the problem if you're having trouble with port forwarding for games on your current router that requires you to adjust it manually, or even switch it off altogether and find a software alternative. But we've had no real issues with this in the past, so most people won't notice the difference the firewall makes – unlike the StreamEngine technology.

This gamer-partisan piece of tech sets Quality of Service up for gaming, the benefit of which is that bandwidth between users is controlled, prioritising it for your gaming needs so that nothing else can mess with your latency, causing lag. SteamEngine will recognise the patterns of gaming applications (including VoIP and streaming video), in the datastream and prioritise them, adjusting their bandwidth for optimal use. You don't have to mire yourself in the technicalities of it either, because StreamEngine does this automatically without any extra settings or software installation required. Those that want a deeper level of customisation can modify the list of application priorities yourself, while anyone with several users on their network can manage the times the internet can be accessed using the Advanced Scheduled Access Control function. It's coupled with a maximum theoretical speed of 300Mbps and though in practice you're not likely to see more than around 100Mbps, it's a very MMO-friendly performance.

The 300N XR is the money when it comes PC gaming across the ether, and if wireless is your infrastructure of choice then this is by far your best value for money option. It can't compete with the speed of straight-forward wired Ethernet, but it still tops networking over powerline and other wireless routers. It has no integrated modem, but this won't pose a problem for cable modem broadband users, and shouldn't be an issue for the majority of ADSL subscribers. At around the £100 mark wherever you look, it's worth giving some considerable thought to this gaming router before you rush out and buy it, but it's certainly a savvy choice for online gamers.

Ben Biggs

Tech specs

- 802.11n Draft 2.0 standard
- Up to 300Mbps routing speed
- Four 10/100/1000 Ethernet ports
- Full-duplex gigabit WAN port
- Game traffic prioritisation

Standout feature

WPS button

The WL-308 300N XR includes a top-mounted WPS button for 'easy one-touch wireless connection and security'. Press it, wait a few minutes and you're ready to go. Simple.

An easy wallmount connector, ideal for clearing space and hitting the wireless sweet spot

Three 3dbi antenna: one more than the average router, for optimal range and coverage

Verdict

Performance	A lightning-fast solution for wireless network users	9
Design	A very slick and trendy piano black finish	8
Features	High specification, the latest wireless standard and gaming features	8
Value	Prepare to fork out twice as much over its competitors	7
Overall	Easy setup with a marked improvement in performance for those with standard wireless networks.	8

MSI NOTEBOOK

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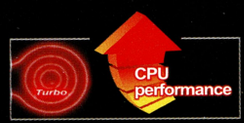

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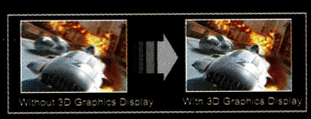

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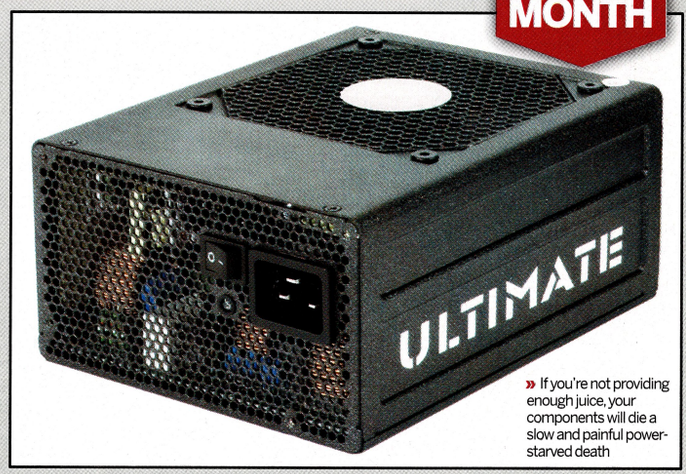
POWER POINT

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Q I've got a question about PSUs. I currently have a 750W PSU, but I was thinking of getting another card for SLI, and I'm pretty sure I'll need a bigger PSU. I just need to know how much bigger.

I'm thinking about adding another 9800GX2 for SLI, but I don't think I'll have enough power. So, in your opinion, how big should I go? I'm currently running a Core 2 Quad at stock settings.

insertAlias, via forum



» If you're not providing enough juice, your components will die a slow and painful power-starved death

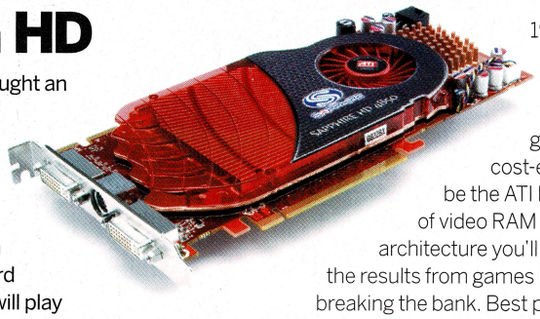
It's great to see a PC gamer who's taking power requirements seriously. It might not be the sexiest component in our PCs, but the power supply is one of the most fundamental. As graphics cards get more powerful (and your GX2 is pretty powerful!) and CPUs gradually increase in cores, the strain on our PSUs becomes quite amazing. One of the best ways of checking your power requirements going forward is to test them out online using a PSU calculator like the one found at **www.thermaltake.outervision.com**. Not only can you find out how much power your system draws now, you can also calculate how much it will draw post-upgrade.

From what we can tell, dropping in a second GX2 will bring your power requirements up to around 538 watts. Since it's probably best not to push your PSU hard, we would recommend gunning for a 900 or 1000W PSU that supports quad-SLI. Happy hunting!

GOING HD

Q I have just bought an HPw1907v monitor (1400 x 900 resolution) and would like to upgrade my current Radeon X1050 graphics card to something that will play games like *BioShock*. I didn't realise that I should have looked for a HD monitor so I could use cards like the Radeon 4800 series, so I'm wondering what would be the best card for me on my current XP system? The PC was put together by a local shop and consists of an Intel Core 2 2.4GHz, 320GB HDD and a 500W PSU. Thanks in advance.

Sadoldgeezer, via forum



Technically speaking, your monitor is HD (if only the lesser breed), and you can at least run 720p videos with your resolution. Still, the good thing about the 'lower' resolution of your shiny new 19-inch monitor is that you don't need the world's beefiest graphics card to power the latest games. Probably the most cost-effective choice would be the ATI HD4850. With 512MB of video RAM and a cutting-edge GPU architecture you'll be very happy with the results from games like *BioShock* without breaking the bank. Best prices at the moment go from about £110, though expect them to come down the closer we get to the New Year.

MOBILE GAMING

Before I go out spending £500 and regretting that decision, I want to get some advice on a laptop that will be able to play *World Of Warcraft* and its upcoming expansion pack without lag or other major problems.

I have been eyeballing the Acer Aspire 5920G for £450 with the 8600M GS graphics card and the Studio Laptop 15 from Dell for £429 featuring the 256MB ATI Mobility Radeon HD3450.

Does anybody recommend a different laptop that can play *WOW* really well?

Md49vd, via forum

Assuming your price range is shy of £500, you will have a pretty hard task on your hands to find anything capable of churning out truly playable frame rates in *World Of Warcraft*. While either of the two you mention will provide playable frames on mediocre graphics settings, if you really want to play games on a laptop you need to invest a little more in more modern components. Thankfully, this doesn't necessarily mean doubling the outlay, as Samsung's R560-AS02 nicely demonstrates. At £669 it's quite a bit more expensive, but the specifications are a far cry from your current options. For example, the Core 2 Duo P7350 (2GHz with 1066MHz FSB and 3MB of cache) will make short work of your requirements and the 4GB of 1066MHz DDR3 RAM is truly cutting-edge. Top this off with a meaty GeForce 9600M powering the 1280x800 15-inch screen and you're laughing. This puppy will bang out playable frame rates with *Crysis* on Medium settings. Mustn't grumble...

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Graphics: 896mb nVidia GTX260 Graphics

Monitor Optional

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Motherboard: Asus P5K SE
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Graphics: 512mb nVidia 9800GT Graphics

Monitor Optional

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Intel Ultra 600 SLI PC

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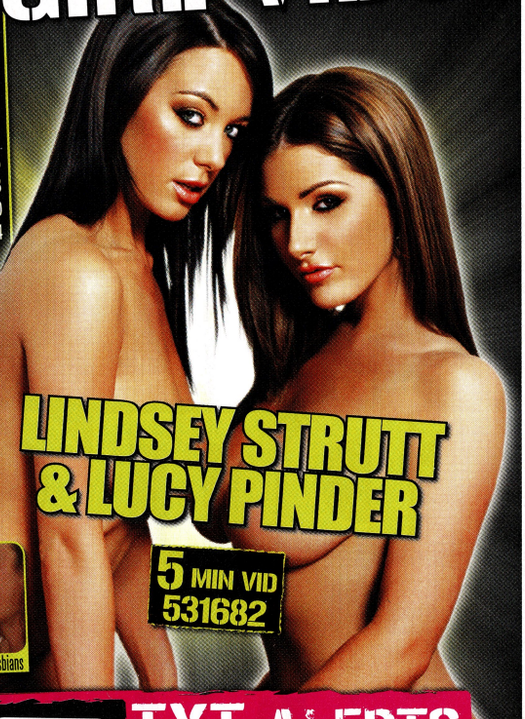

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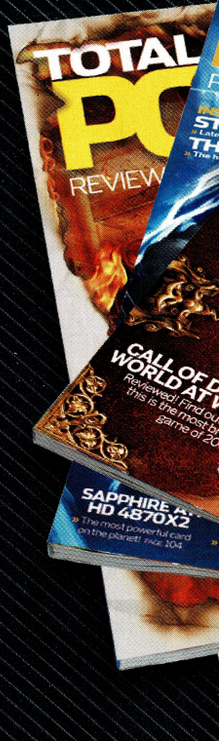

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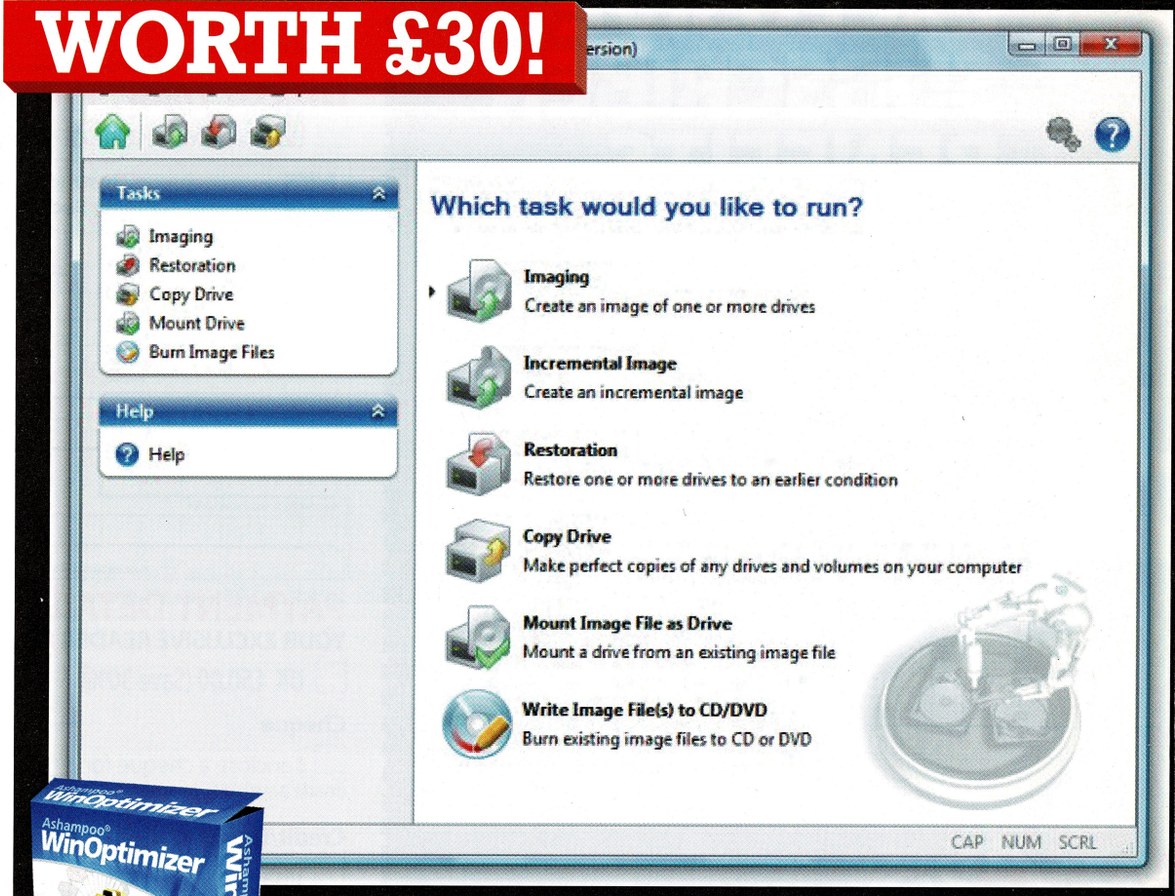

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IN GOG WE TRUST

And on the seventh day he created an almighty retro download service...

The PC is one of gaming's most diverse machines and has helped to release an astonishing amount of classic games over the years, ranging from *Doom* to the *Baldur's Gate* franchise. The Good Old Games website obviously thinks so too, as it's trying to group together as many classic titles as possible on its new download service. We spoke to Tom Ohle of CD Projekt, the company running the site, about what could be an essential download service for classic games.

TPCG: Where did the idea for Good Old Games come from?
TOM OHLE: Right around GDC 2007, some of the guys from CD Projekt were talking about what makes up a good game, and they realised that lots of the characteristics they found appealing were commonplace in the good old games that they used to play. After realising these titles were hard to find and weren't optimised for Windows XP or Windows Vista, they hit upon the idea of GOG.com.

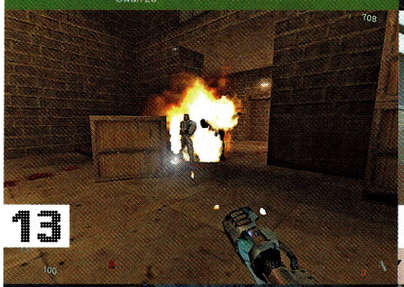
TPCG: Why did you decide to go down the PC games route rather than that of console titles?
TO: I think that the audiences that played the games we're talking about – PC games throughout the late-Eighties, Nineties and early-Noughties – are generally a different bunch than those who would be interested in playing their old Sega Mega Drive games on their PCs. It's also just easier for us to do PC games: with console titles we would have to worry about emulation and other issues inherent to the fact that it's not the native medium.

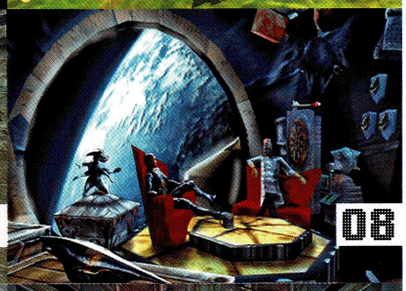
TPCG: Why did you choose Interplay for your first deal?
TO: We didn't choose Interplay, it just happened that way. Interplay has created some of the greatest PC games of all time, and we were very happy to sign a deal with them. Their back catalogue is very impressive, with games such as *Fallout*, *MDK* and *FreeSpace 2*, just to a name a few. These are all games that players remember fondly, but which are generally very difficult to buy nowadays. We're talking with many other publishers right now, and more will follow Interplay shortly.

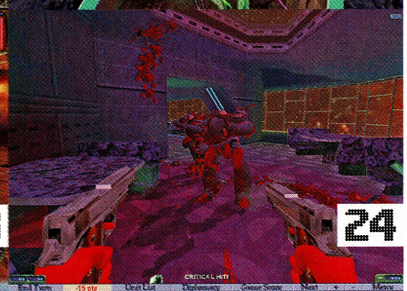
TPCG: What can subscribers expect from the Good Old Games service?
TO: We've got an easy-to-use website with superb games at low prices, and each game has a specially prepared product page. Once you buy the game, it's yours forever as the games are Digital Rights Management-free. After purchase, there's a hassle-free download – you get to choose how you download your purchases, either via http link or with our simple download manager. Then you get a slick and very simple installer, and you'll be off playing classic games that have been optimised to run on Windows XP and Windows Vista. On top of all that, gamers will find some great additional material with every game, like game guides, walkthroughs and more. Everything has been thought of with the gamer in mind.

TPCG: How many publishers do you hope to join the service?
TO: In short: as many as possible. We want Good Old Games to be the definitive place to buy classic PC games. For now we're starting with a relatively small group, but we're keen to show every publisher that they absolutely need to put their best back-catalogue titles on the site.

TPCG: How much will the games cost to download from GOG.com?
TO: Either $5.99 or $9.99 including taxes. It's possible that we'll explore other price







points in the future, but that's what we're starting with. We think those prices are extremely reasonable.

TPCG: You've mentioned downloaded games won't have copy protection, are you not worried about piracy?

TO: Sure, piracy is a concern. While talking with the publishers, the most common reaction to our Digital Rights Management-free idea was, 'you want to do what?' We have a few reasons, however, to be confident in our approach:

1) Gamers are sick of intrusive copy protection. Paying customers don't want to be treated like criminals and just want to play the damn game. All games get pirated – we're just trying to make it easy for people who have legitimately purchased the game to play it.

2) The price is right. You're looking at less than the price of a decent lunch for countless hours of gameplay.

3) We're good people and we think that the gamers that are likely to want to play these games are, too – they'll tend to be fairly mature players who know that piracy isn't going to benefit anyone in the long run. People often pirate games for a number of reasons, namely because they want to try them out before buying, or they want to see if they'll run on their PCs. Neither of those is a problem here as you're not too likely to want to buy one of these games if you haven't already played it, and if you don't have a PC that's capable of running them, then... well, you're due for an upgrade.

TPCG: Will you be able to download brand new titles or will they mostly be retro related?

TO: Our focus is on classic PC games, but that doesn't mean that every title will be from the Eighties or Nineties – we already have several games lined up that were released as recently as 2006. On forums everywhere, I keep seeing people posting "I wish I could play this game again" or "I tried to install this game on a new system and it wouldn't work." We've really built up a long list of games that people want to play again.

TPCG: Will there be the option of buying old compilations of games at a cheaper price like Steam?

TO: Our prices are low to start with, but I'm sure that we'll leave the door open for promotions, bundles and whatever else the marketing guys can dream up.

TPCG: What other services will Good Old Games be offering?

TO: We're really looking to make Good Old Games more than just an online store – we're calling it the 'GOG.com experience,' which is ultimately just a fancy way of saying we'll have the store and an extensive community dedicated to the games we're selling. We're approaching some of the best freelance writers in the business to put together retrospective articles on some of our top games, we've got a massive forum system that lets you comment on and discuss every title we sell, you can rate and review games, download game guides, wallpapers and other unique additional materials... the list goes on.

TPCG: What can Good Old Games offer that other similar services can't?

TO: For a start, we've got Digital Rights Management-free games, so when you buy the game you own it, rather than being dependent on a service. We're gamers ourselves and we don't like being restricted or to have some draconian copy-protection schemes put in place, so we've done away with that and we believe that gamers will be happy with our service – it will give them more time to be excited about the games rather than be absorbed with the copy-protection scheme. Finally, we're also investing a lot of time and effort into making GOG.com the definitive community dedicated to classic PC games.

THE GOOD OLD GAMES

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02 Colin McRae Rally 2005
03 F/A-18E Super Hornet
04 Fallout 2
05 Freespace 2
06 Giants: Citizen Kabuto
07 Gothic
08 MDK
09 Sensible Soccer 2006
10 Shattered Steel
11 Soldiers: Heroes Of World War II
12 Messiah
13 Kingpin: Life Of Crime
14 I.G.I. 2: Covert Strike
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